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**Testimony of New Destiny Housing Corporation**  
**Joint Hearing by Committee on General Welfare and the Committee on Women's Issues**  
**October 30, 2017**

**Presented by**  
**Carol Corden, Executive Director, New Destiny Housing Corporation**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this Oversight Hearing for New York City Human Resources Administration's (HRA) Domestic Violence Shelter System. My name is Carol Corden and I am the Executive Director of New Destiny Housing, a 23-year old not-for-profit committed to ending the cycle of domestic violence and homelessness by connecting families to safe, permanent housing and services. New Destiny currently operates 7 service-enriched affordable housing projects—this is permanent housing with services on site-- that set aside at least half of the units for domestic violence survivors and their children leaving HRA shelters.

I want to begin by acknowledging that New York City has one of the largest shelter systems specifically dedicated to victims of domestic violence in the nation with almost 2,230 emergency beds and 245 transitional units. Moreover, this Administration has made a commitment to add 300 new emergency beds and 400 new Tier II family units. It has also developed the LINC 3 and CityFEPS rental subsidies for domestic violence survivors in shelter -- making it possible for more shelter residents to compete for permanent housing in the private market.

Nonetheless, domestic violence continues to be an important contributor to the growing homelessness problem in New York City. In fact, it is now *the* leading generator of family homelessness in our City. And, in New York City, almost 70% of shelter users are families and as many as 27,000 are children. The typical profile of a family shelter user is a young woman of color with one or two young children. According to the City's own estimates, over 30% of the families entering the non-confidential shelter system have a history of domestic violence or have identified it as the precipitating factor for becoming homeless. In the 2016 HUD Point In Time (PIT) Count for New York City, victims of domestic violence tied for third place as the City's largest homeless sub-population.

My comments today focus not on the shelter system itself but on **what happens at the end of the survivor's stay**. New York City's domestic violence shelter system offers robust support services in a safe, confidential location for survivors of domestic violence. But, it provides survivors only a brief respite because most of the beds available are in emergency shelters with a State-mandated 180-day maximum stay.

The question that haunts domestic violence shelter residents, causing them great stress and fear, is "where can we go after shelter?" **For the majority, the answer is seldom safe, affordable housing.**

For over eight years, New Destiny collected data on the destinations of domestic violence survivors leaving shelter. The percentage of shelter residents leaving for permanent housing seldom reached 20% even when rental subsidies such as Advantage were available. The overwhelming majority of residents left shelter still homeless and at continued risk of abuse. Some stayed temporarily with family and friends or applied for shelter in the general homeless system. Some, unfortunately, returned to their batterers and the situation they initially gathered the courage to leave.

Since New Destiny stopped collecting data on post-shelter destinations in 2011, we don't know have access to data that tells us what happens to survivors after their shelter stay ends. Yet, this information is critical to assessing how well the shelter system is serving victims of violence.

**We, therefore, enthusiastically support Intro 1739 which would require HRA to issue information about where shelter residents go at the end of their time in shelter.**

Our City, while it has done a good job of responding to crisis and trying to keep victims out of harm's way, has not focused enough attention and energy on the question of what comes after shelter. This is a particularly critical question for survivors because they are in a short-term system and have children, who like them, are still traumatized by domestic violence and the disruptions caused by homelessness. Domestic violence shelter residents also are overwhelmingly low-income with little or interrupted job histories that make it difficult, if not impossible, to afford housing in New York City without assistance.

The following housing resources should be available to domestic violence shelter residents:

- **NYC 15/15 supportive housing** for the most vulnerable individuals and families
- **Homeless set-aside units** in new construction and preservation projects funded by New York City Dept. of Housing Preservation and Development
- **Long-term rental subsidies** like Section 8 that open up possibilities in the private housing market
- **NYCHA housing** obtained through an N-0 priority – the top priority for accessing public housing

Right now, however, **these resources are not available, or not readily available, to domestic violence shelter residents.**

Let's look at two examples - **NYC 15/15 supportive housing** and **HPD homeless housing resources.**

NYC 15/15 supportive housing provides permanent housing with extensive social services on site. There are individuals and families using the domestic violence shelter system who have been severely traumatized by their domestic violence experiences – this trauma in combination with the youth of mothers, the very young children they are responsible for, and their lack of social support networks results in high barriers to housing stability.

However, the gateway to NYC 15/15 supportive housing is the 2010e screening form—a form that is focused on chronically homeless individuals with medical disabilities. New York City's domestic violence system as we have noted is short-term, making it difficult for families to meet HUD's requirement of "chronically homeless," and a medical or mental health diagnosis threatens family stability. A homeless mother labeled as having a medical disability is more likely to lose her children in a custody battle with her batterer. She has two strikes against her – she cannot provide stable housing for her children and she has a diagnosis that threatens her competency as a parent.

A very similar process was used for NY/NY III -- the City/State supportive housing program that ended in 2015. Over a period of 10 years, very few residents of the domestic violence system were able to access supportive housing under NY/NY III. **The new NYC 15/15 program, as currently set up, will also exclude most families headed by domestic violence survivors.** As a result, this housing is not available to domestic violence shelter users, no matter how great their need.

This doesn't have to be the case. Youth, one of the homeless groups prioritized under NYC 15/15, is not screened using the 2010e process. There is an understanding that youth are vulnerable to homelessness because of their life circumstances not necessarily because of a medical disability. Similar accommodations could be made for vulnerable homeless families headed by domestic violence survivors.

A second source of homeless housing resources are controlled by the City's housing agency. HPD has set aside units in its City-subsidized preservation and new construction projects for homeless households. HPD's Administrative Plan notes that all homeless shelter system users are eligible for the resources controlled by the Agency. However, access to HPD's set-asides is largely controlled by DHS, the City's largest shelter system, and so homeless residents of the general homeless system have an advantage in applying for those units. HRA domestic violence shelter residents should have parity with DHS applicants and should be regularly referred to the HPD pipeline. HPD-administered Section 8 rental subsidies, when available, should also be routinely made available to domestic violence survivors from the HRA shelter system.

We—and by “we” I mean government, public agencies that serve this population, advocates, service and shelter providers—must do a better job of ensuring that domestic violence shelter users have **equal access to existing resources**. Moreover, we must advocate for new resources – such as **rapid rehousing programs and new models of service-enriched housing** specifically for domestic violence survivors. We also need to consider **alternatives to shelter programs** which can help families and individuals who can safely do so remain in their current housing or move quickly to other permanent housing, as has been successfully done in both Washington State and Oregon. The recent announcement of the Home + Safe program by First Lady Chirlane McCray may be a promising move in this direction.

Helping domestic violence survivors transition successfully to safe, permanent housing is one of the key services that shelters must provide to ensure that survivors and their families can build on the healing work done in shelter and continue their progress toward long-term safety and stability, free of violence.

We thank the Council for the opportunity to speak today and welcome any questions you may have.