

# HOUSING NOT HANDCUFFS

## PRESS RELEASE

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## **Housing Not Handcuffs campaign holds a press conference at City Hall calling for an end to the criminalization of people experiencing homelessness in New York**

New York City endorsers of the nationwide Housing Not Handcuffs campaign, which included homeless services providers, advocates, legal services and social justice organizations, and current and formerly homeless, stood together on the steps of City Hall to call for cost-effective solutions to the homeless crisis, and an end to the criminalization of people experiencing homelessness in New York City and across the nation.

**Disturbing anti-poverty laws and policies are popping up in cities across the nation, which criminalize the act of homelessness by outlawing people's ability to sit, sleep, or even eat in public places. These unconstitutional and inhumane laws do not address the causes of homelessness. They must stop, and we must put our energies into cost-effective solutions including access to affordable housing.**

New York City does not have homeless criminalization laws in place. However **selective enforcement practices by the NYPD do occur, such as "move-along" orders which disproportionately target homeless and perceived homeless individuals.** These unwarranted police interactions can result in harassment, costly fines, loss of personal property, and imprisonment. Aside from the immediate consequences, these actions can impact a person's ability to maintain employment, their physical and mental well-being, and their eligibility for housing programs and services.

The criminalization of homelessness is an ineffective and dehumanizing means to address a social problem. Instead we must invest in proven solutions such as access to affordable housing, education, health care, employment, income, and other opportunities and services that allow everyone to live with dignity.

New York is proudly at the forefront of housing and homeless rights, with a state mandated legal right to shelter, and a comprehensive safety net of emergency housing, services, and resources. **We call upon the City and State to realign law enforcement practices to accurately reflect local and state law which purposely avoid singling out or penalizing people based solely on their perceived housing status or income level.** Likewise, through stronger enforcement of existing laws that protect those at risk of or currently homeless, such as fair housing and source of income discrimination laws, New York can better ensure everyone has a viable path home.

**Now more than ever, we need to stand together to promote cost-effective solutions to the homelessness crisis and defend the rights of all Americans who have been marginalized and disproportionately targeted because of their poverty.** “When people are experiencing poverty, homelessness, and other economic crises, they want what we all want: to be met with support, respect and compassion,” said **Eric Tars, Senior Attorney at the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty.** “However, too many communities are using handcuffs instead of housing to address homelessness issues, eroding community trust, doing nothing to increase community safety, and costing far more than simply providing access to stable housing. That’s why hundreds of organizations and individuals are joining our campaign for Housing Not Handcuffs, to call for implementing the best practices that are working around the country, so we can all enjoy a community where no one has to sleep on the streets or beg for their daily needs.”

“New York City needs real solutions to address our homelessness crisis: it’s essential that we don’t stigmatize or punish vulnerable communities, but instead connect people who are homeless to affordable and stable homes,” said **General Welfare Chair, Council Member Stephen Levin.** “I applaud the Housing Not Handcuffs campaign for highlighting how the right to shelter must be upheld both in theory and in practice. And because I am committed to fighting for constructive policy options, I’m introducing legislation today with Council Member Williams to ensure that certain landlords are held accountable to their promises to provide affordable housing.”

**Carl Siciliano, executive director of Ali Forney Center** stated, "Over half of the homeless LGBT youths in our care do not have access to safe shelter. It is horrific to see desperate young people become criminalized as a direct consequence of having nowhere safe to stay. Homeless people need housing, not jail cells."

**G. Robert Watts, executive director of Care for the Homeless** said, “Stigmatizing and criminalizing poverty and homelessness is a growing problem in America, and must be stopped. Criminalizing social problems and human needs does absolutely nothing to solve the problems, but exacerbates them at great cost to the public. The solution for homelessness is stable, affordable housing with appropriate supports. This is a real solution that saves lives, improves health, revitalizes communities and saves substantial amounts of taxpayer funds. We need more house keys instead of handcuffs!”

**Catherine Trapani executive director of Homeless Services United** explained, “Here in New York and across the nation we are calling for an end to the criminalization of homelessness and poverty. Housing is a human right. Unless and until that right is upheld for every person in need it is unconscionable to subject anyone to criminal consequences for simply existing in a public space as a homeless person. Instead of enacting ordinances that forbid sleeping in a public space or threatening people with arrest or fines if they refuse to “move along” when ordered by police, we need to focus on providing people with access to truly affordable housing to negate the need to sleep in public in the first place. Homelessness can only be solved by providing homeless people throughout the country with housing, not prison cells. Homeless Services United is proud to support the Housing not Handcuffs campaign.”

"The war on the homeless being waged in cities and towns across the country should call all of us to action. More police and more violence won't solve our problems, only coming together to demand that we all get our needs met," stated **Shailly Gupta Barnes, program manager of Kairos: The Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary.**

"We're dedicated to the principle that housing is a human right, and that all people, regardless of age, ability, race, gender or economic status, are entitled to decent and affordable housing," **said Jeanette Zelhof, executive director of MFY Legal Services, Inc.** "People should not be forced into shelters, prisons, or the streets when their only 'crime' is that they cannot afford to pay for a roof over their heads."

"The crime of homelessness is not on the person or family who is homeless but on our society. Housing is a fundamental human right. Not only must we end the criminalization of people who are poor and homeless, we need to create the real housing and economic solutions to end this scourge in our city and our nation." said **Michael Callaghan, executive director of Nazareth Housing.**

"The Osborne Association strongly supports the Housing Not Handcuffs campaign to end the criminalization of homelessness. The thousands of people who are released directly from New York's prisons into the city's homeless shelters understand all too well the consequences of the dual crisis of affordable housing and housing discrimination. The continued criminalization of homelessness threatens the well-being and success of people who are working to build and rebuild lives of meaning and contribution." stated **Elizabeth Gaynes, president and CEO of Osborne Association.**

**Sr. Janet Kinney, Executive Director of Providence House** said, "Every faith tradition shares a belief that all life is sacred and how we respect and treat one another, is fundamental to a moral society. It is our obligation to protect *everyone's* basic human right to be treated with reverence, particularly those who are the most vulnerable – those who are homeless. Our social, housing and policing policies *must* reflect this and be put to this litmus test: do they threaten or will they enhance the life of the person in front of us? Compassion, not criminalization should be our first response."

"Urban Pathways enthusiastically endorses the Housing Not Handcuffs Campaign. Ending the crisis of homelessness requires a dual approach of prevention and affordable housing, including supportive housing. Absent from this dual approach is the criminalization of homelessness, which only hinders our ability to provide homeless and at-risk New Yorkers a way home." said **Frederick Shack, CEO of Urban Pathways.**

### **About Housing Not Handcuffs**

Housing Not Handcuffs, a national campaign convened by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and joined by non-profit organizations and individuals across the country, seeks to end the nationwide criminalization of the poor, homeless, and perceived homeless people.

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