22 April 2020

Corey Johnson
Speaker
New York City Council

Stephen Levin
Chair, General Welfare Committee
New York City Council

Re: Comment on New York City Council legislation to Create Safe Spaces for Vulnerable Persons and Those with Presumed or Confirmed Mild to Moderate COVID-19 Disease

Dear Speaker Johnson and General Welfare Committee Levin:

We write to follow-up on our letter to you and colleagues from April 15, 2020 with an urgent request. We are encouraged that tomorrow the New York City Council will consider legislation to provide safe shelter. We ask you to broaden the eligibility for safe spaces beyond the homeless and shelter residents to all New Yorkers who may be living with presumed or diagnosed mild to moderate COVID-19 disease and are unable to safely self-isolate at home due to crowded living conditions or the inability to care for themselves.

In the words of today’s press release from the Council:

“Prioritizing Public Health: Providing safe shelter (Sponsored by Council Member Stephen Levin and Speaker Johnson): Sheltering at home isn’t possible if you don’t have a home. The crowded conditions of our shelter system do not allow residents to take necessary precautions or observe social distancing. This is a danger to all New Yorkers during this public health crisis. The Council will therefore consider legislation that will require the City to provide each single adult homeless individual with a private room through the end of the pandemic and implement protocols to reduce risk of infection. In effect, this would require the City to temporarily close many shelters and move residents to hotels or other facilities with private rooms.” Council member Levin added, “I am proud to sponsor a bill
with Speaker Johnson that addresses the systemic issues in our shelter system that make it impossible for residents to observe social distancing. Those issues put all New Yorkers at risk, which is why we are addressing them is so important in this public health crisis. This crisis has shown in stark terms that we are all interconnected. It is inhumane and dangerous to allow New Yorkers to remain in unsafe shelter conditions.” [NY City Council press release, 21 April 2020]

We write to emphasize the critical need for safe shelter among other New Yorkers – in particular, as we said in our letter on April 15, that “individuals with a high risk of exposure or presumed or confirmed COVID-19 with mild to moderate disease who are unable to self-isolate at home be offered the option – by New York State or New York City – of safe spaces where they can voluntarily be isolated in a supportive environment.” This would provide the affected individuals with the support they need while at the same time would prevent transmission to their families and loved ones. Asking individuals with highly transmissible infection to stay home in a situation where they are unable to self-isolate or where they are unable to get the supports they need is inadvisable. Likewise, individuals vulnerable to having poor COVID-19 health outcomes due to age or underlying medical conditions must have alternatives to institutional settings or shared living arrangements where they face a high risk of exposure, if a household member is diagnosed with COVID-19.

We are eager to support the work by the New York City Council to achieve safe spaces for all those exposed to, infected by, or living with presumed or diagnosed COVID-19. Thank you for your efforts. Please let us know how we can help.

Yours truly,

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