Defund The NYPD: 
Homeless New Yorkers Need Housing, Not Police!

The #HomelessCantStayHome campaign demands the complete removal of the NYPD from homeless outreach. For decades, homeless New Yorkers have been subjected to cruel, racist, and counterproductive policing efforts. These practices result in the criminalization and abuse of homeless people, who are overwhelmingly black and brown. According to our estimates, the NYPD budgets $20M/year explicitly to police homeless New Yorkers under the guise of “homeless outreach”, over $50M for NYPD and other security in shelters, and tens of millions more for police initiatives that end up engaging with homeless New Yorkers.

As communities call on our City to defund the NYPD, we highlight a number of recent NYPD and joint-DHS-NYPD initiatives that have been presented as “homeless outreach,” but in reality have caused further harm and criminalization of homeless people. By design, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the exact cost of joint initiatives where NYPD is working with social services agencies. However, to the best of our ability, we have estimated the costs for each line.

1. **Eliminate the NYPD’s Homeless Outreach Unit and the Joint Command Center:**

   **Cost:** $11.5 million per year for uniformed officers, and $2.6 million per year for 20 nurses

   **Recommendation:** Eliminate entirely, reinvest in housing

   **Background:** The purpose of the NYPD’s Homeless Outreach Unit, according to the NYPD, is to engage with homeless people, offer services, and monitor violations of the law. Our perspective is that the entire mission of the HOU is illegitimate: police have no place in "outreach," and homeless people should be offered services by service providers, not police officers. Finally, homeless people should not be profiled by police simply for being homeless.

   ![An NYPD officer forcing a man with one shoe out of the subway station and into the rain during the COVID-19 subway closure. (Photo: Human.nyc)](an_nypd_officer_forcing_a_man_with_one_shoe_out_of_the_subway_station_and_into_the_rain_during_the_covid-19_subway_closure._photo_human.nyc)

These line items by no means represent the entire scope of the NYPD’s interaction with homeless New Yorkers. For example, over $15 million directed to the NYPD per year to “Healing NYC” - the City’s response to the opioid crisis, is not included in our analysis despite its intersection with the homeless population. Our analysis is based on publicly available information and does not include other costly efforts to police homeless people, such as the 1,000 NYPD officers per night sent out to remove unhoused people during the COVID-19 subway shutdown. This horrific initiative needs to end immediately as well.

Further, we did not include costs associated with the NYPD in the shelter system, where the city spends at least $5.9M/year on NYPD “Peace Officers” and more than $45M/year subcontracted to private security firms. In fact, under Mayor de Blasio, DHS has seen unprecedented moves toward a policing orientation, including placing all DHS security operations directly under NYPD supervision.

All monies set aside for policing homeless New Yorkers should instead be invested into housing them. We wholeheartedly support the #NYCBudgetJustice campaign to reduce the NYPD’s budget by at least $1 billion, reinvesting that money into communities of color. #HomelessCantStayHome ultimately envisions the removal of policing from homeless services and a City where shelters are unnecessary because everyone has a safe, affordable home to live in.
City-contracted homeless outreach teams are not only better trained to engage with people and offer services, but further, the NYPD’s HOU is not actually able to place people into DHS systems like outreach teams can (and in no circumstances would we support giving them that ability). “Monitoring violations of the law” subjects homeless New Yorkers to disproportionate levels of policing, especially given that many of the incidents HOU responds to are simply driven by calls from NIMBYists.

In November of 2019, Mayor de Blasio announced his “Journey Home” plan to end long-term street homelessness. Unfortunately, a core part of his plan was the introduction of the Street Homelessness Joint Command Center, an Orwellian surveillance center with access to thousands of street cameras, which the Mayor used to increase HOU staff from 37 officers to 96. The City must immediately shut down the Joint Command Center, which would not only save costs associated with NYPD, but would also free up DHS funding that could be put to better use.

The HOU is also responsible for the cruel street sweeps (or “clean-ups”) that occur across the City each week, in which the NYPD repeatedly displace homeless people surviving on our streets without offering any meaningful help. Sweeps harm homeless people and are costly as they involve not only NYPD, but also DHS/DSS and DSNY. These efforts have dramatically increased under Mayor de Blasio - nearly 45% between 2017 and 2019. They continued to increase during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite explicit CDC guidance against this practice and calls from homeless New Yorkers, outreach workers, and advocates to stop the sweeps. Besides sweeps, the HOU is known among homeless New Yorkers for consistently approaching them to collect information, then being unable to offer any services or resources.

In February of 2020 - as politicians and others called for detaining homeless people due to perceived mental illness and expanding the use of Kendra’s Law - the NYPD announced it would hire 20 nurses through a contract with NYC Health + Hospitals at a cost of $2.6 million per year. Consistent with Mayor de Blasio’s efforts to expand police operations within social services, he placed these nurses with the NYPD. These nurses should be removed from the NYPD immediately and placed into DHS outreach or ACT teams, where workers have said they would benefit from having more nurses and medical personnel on staff.

2. End the Subway Diversion Program:

Cost: We estimate the cost of the Subway Diversion Program (SDP) is $5.4M/year for NYPD Transit. The estimate multiplied the total budget of NYPD Transit by the % of summons given that were SDP-related. Recommendation: Reduce the budget of NYPD Transit, reinvest in housing

Background: The Subway Diversion Program was pitched to the public as a way to divert homeless New Yorkers from criminal justice involvement, but unfortunately, it has had the opposite impact. The City’s own data shows that the majority of the time, homeless

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people targeted by the Subway Diversion Program receive costly summonses and fines. At a City Council oversight hearing in January 2020, homeless New Yorkers testified about officers asking them if they need services, and then writing them a summons and putting them in handcuffs. It is widely believed that the initiative was introduced in part because the NYPD Transit Officers had spare time with the crime levels reducing. In November of 2019, a group of NYPD Transit Officers penned a letter calling the program “blatant discrimination against the homeless in the NYC subway.”

By investing deeply in permanent housing, the City will ultimately save billions in policing and shelter costs. In addition to the policing costs outlined above, DHS's annual budget is $2.1 billion, most of which is used to operate homeless shelters. New York City pays between $3,000 and $5,000 monthly to keep people in shelters where their health, safety, and stability are undermined. New York City must invest in permanent housing for all who need it, while taking concrete steps to remove the need for shelters. As part of the FY2021 budget, we call on the City to immediately:

3. Invest in Permanent Housing and Immediate Safety in Hotel Rooms for Homeless People

Funds from the NYPD should be used to secure permanent housing for homeless people in New York City. While policing only serves to further criminalize homeless people, deeply affordable housing is the solution.

Our housing and homelessness crises disproportionately impact black and brown communities that have experienced rampant gentrification. In NYC Department of Homeless Services shelters, 89 percent of heads of household are Black or Latinx - 57 percent are Black and 32 percent are Hispanic/Latinx. The COVID crisis has magnified the impact of these disparities. Recent reports show that homeless people in shelters in NYC were 61% more likely to die from COVID-19. It is no exaggeration to say that our homeless brothers and sisters are dying due to our failure to provide them with safe and stable housing.
County, Putnam County, and Westchester County in its calculations (in addition to the five boroughs). As such, we recommend that the Council require that the City use a median or fair market rent for NYC only in determining CityFHEPS levels.

B. **Immediately house homeless New Yorkers in existing HPD affordable housing units.** There is still significant capacity in City-subsidized affordable housing units, including vacant HPD Housing Connect Units (some of which are currently reserved for those making over six figures). Every available HPD unit should be utilized immediately in order to house homeless New Yorkers and provide them with the safety and stability that they deserve. For more expensive units, the City should ensure that there is adequate CityFHEPS funding in order to subsidize higher-income units so that households pay no more than 30% of their income.

C. **Restore HPD capital funding, expanding the construction of new affordable housing units.** In the Mayor’s executive budget he proposes a 40% cut to HPD’s capital budget, while only cutting NYPD’s budget less than 1%, meaning 21k desperately needed affordable housing units will never be created. These units are needed now more than ever, and it is essential that construction is not delayed. The City must also place homeless people in these units and ensure that these units are affordable for them.

D. **Pass Intro 1927 and secure immediate safety in private hotel rooms for homeless people** who are living unsheltered on streets and subways and those who continue to be stuck in dangerous, dorm-style shelters. People on the streets continue to contact our campaign every day in search of safe, private hotel rooms. DHS has failed to provide the private rooms that people need to stay safe. Since FEMA has approved reimbursement for the vast majority of these costs, Intro 1927 should not require significant funding beyond the DHS budget.

E. **Commit to providing housing for all and decreasing the need for shelters.**

While we often hear politicians demand a "right to housing," it is rare that concrete steps are taken in that direction on the City level. The Mayor and City Council immediately must shift orientation toward a right to housing.

In addition to the solutions described above, there is still tremendous housing stock in vacant City or State-owned and privately-owned buildings and land, including vacant rent-stabilized units, condos, and empty NYCHA units. All vacant buildings and land should be converted into high-quality, affordable housing that is accessible to homeless people and low and no income people and the City should drastically increase support for community land trusts. Additionally, the number of individual supportive housing units should be increased and all unoccupied supportive housing units must be made available, without bureaucratic barriers, to homeless people using a Housing First approach to housing placement.

About #HomelessCantStayHome:

#HomelessCantStayHome is a campaign led by grassroots member-led organizations. The campaign consists of Communities United for Police Reform, Human.nyc, Neighbors Together, Picture The Homeless, Safety Net Project at the Urban Justice Center, and VOCAL New York. Since its inception, #HomelessCantStayHome has called for the police to be removed from homeless outreach, 30,000 private hotel rooms for homeless New Yorkers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and housing for all homeless New Yorkers.