



**WOMEN'S
CITY CLUB**
OF NEW YORK

Shaping Policy
Improving Lives

wccny.org

Case Study of WCC's Work Focused on Homelessness in NYC

BACKGROUND

The Women's City Club of New York (WCC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, multi-issue activist organization that is dedicated to improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers. WCC works to shape public policy to promote responsive government through education, issue analysis, advocacy and civic participation. Now in its second century of service, WCC has focused its efforts to empowering women to become more civically engaged.

New York City was facing an emergency situation in 1988; some 1200 women were living in the city's shelters for single women, plus untold numbers in the streets. These women were particularly vulnerable, had urgent unmet needs, and their numbers were growing proportionately more rapidly than the numbers of homeless men. As WCC noted in one of its early reports, "*The time and the opportunity to end homelessness for women is here.*"

New York City has sheltered homeless people since 1896. Homelessness emerged as a significant social phenomenon in the 1970s and New York City set up an emergency system of temporary shelters, a "helter-skelter" network of armories schools and churches, and sometimes hotels. The existing emergency shelter system grew in a scattered ad hoc fashion as the city scrambled under pressure of court mandates in the early and mid-80s to find beds for a mushrooming homeless population.

In early 1988, WCC members formed *The Homeless Women's Project* so as to more thoroughly examine and address the needs of single women in city shelters. The primary concern was to identify suitable permanent housing sources and improvements in conditions and services. The next step was to inform the public, lobby elected officials and seek media attention to illustrate the need for action and thereby remedy the situation.

ACTIONS

Conferences

A report *Home Again, A Plan for New York City's Homeless Women*, issued by the New York City Council Select Committee on Homelessness chaired by Councilman Abe Gerges served as the catalyst and framework for WCC to organize a citywide conference cosponsored by the NYC

City Council, IBM Corp. and the WCC. Professionals from WCC membership led the development of the initiative including scheduling initial meetings with shelter directors, creating a citywide mailing list including presidents and executive directors of civic and women's organizations and focusing the impact of the conference on three major areas: permanent affordable housing, conditions in women's shelters, and reuniting mothers whose children were in foster care for lack of appropriate housing. The daylong conference, attended by a capacity audience of 175 people representing 70 organizations, took place in IBM facilities on May 16, 1988. A summary report was issued and circulated to all the attendees affirming support of permanent affordable housing to meet the needs of today's homeless women without delay.

As a result of the conference, WCC founded the Coalition for Homeless Women that same year. It was comprised of 42 advocacy, social service, civic and research organizations. Within three years, it had grown to include 71 organizations.

In January 1992, the WCC and the Coalition for Homeless Women organized a follow-up conference titled, "*Beyond Small Facilities and Good Intentions: Improving the Women's Shelter System in NYC*". The summer of 1991 was spent getting the necessary city permissions to enter the shelters. This accomplished, a team of 14 Coalition members including members of the WCC were trained by experienced social workers in ways to talk with women in the shelters that would elicit the most information. Using a tested questionnaire, WCC conducted a four week survey of the city's shelters in order to examine the quality of services provided and to recommend improvements that could be implemented without major infusions of public money.

The second conference with Mayor Dinkins as keynote speaker and the accompanying report were the results of that survey. The findings convinced us that significant and radical system-wide change was necessary if homeless women were to ultimately function successfully outside the shelters. In addition it was strongly recommended that the city "contract out" an increasing number of shelters and services to not-for-profit service providers who, for a number of reasons were able to deliver more "bang for the buck." Given this era of scarce public dollars the city was compelled to use its limited resources more effectively.

The Directory

In reflecting upon the difficulties these women faced, WCC members were appalled by the shelter conditions. It was also obvious that the city had no comprehensive directory of housing resources suitable for their placement. WCC resolved to fill this gap until the city would take on the task. We interviewed public and private agency officials to determine the scope of necessary information. Professional assistance was sought in order to design a questionnaire that would collect data on the individual City facilities. WCC volunteers conducted phone surveys with both staff and sponsors of permanent and transitional housing. Among the agencies consulted were the Mayor's Office on Homelessness and SRO Housing, the SRO Loan Program of the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the NY Regional Office of NYS Office of Mental Health, Columbia University Community Services, West Side SRO Law Project, SRO law Project of Mobilization for Youth Legal Services, and individual member organizations of the Coalition for Homeless Women.

A grant from the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation and contributions from the IBM Corporation, the Real Estate Board of New York and the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company supported the development of the directory. These funds were used to hire an intern and professional staff as well as to pay for the actual publication. The first edition was issued in 1990 designed for use by placement counselors or housing specialists. However, in response to demand, a 1992 enlarged edition was developed that would be distributed to hospitals, prisons, and public libraries as well.

Reports

In February 1992 a report of the NYC Commission on the Homeless also recommended fundamental restructuring whereby “not for profits should develop and operate the necessary facilities and programs.” This was clear evidence that WCC had succeeded in getting the city to adopt its recommendation. In order to spur implementation of the recommendation, WCC conducted a follow-up survey to determine the feasibility of the not for profits actually taking over these responsibilities.

WCC issued *The City as Contractor: the Perspective From Six Not-for-Profit Social Service Providers* in March 1993 recommending the following: development of lists of prequalified providers by each government agency as required, a clear explanation of the contracting process, multiyear contracts, implementation of a prompt payment system for all vouchers, upgrading of status qualifications and training of contracting and compliance officers, and finally, mayoral promulgation of a policy statement on contracting out and the establishment of an advisory committee of the not for profits.

In the summer of 1994, WCC and members of the Coalition for Homeless Women returned to the shelters to interview residents and directors. The findings were disappointing. Many gains had been lost and movement of homeless people into permanent housing was slow. No longer a temporary social problem, we issued a new report in May 1995: *An Emergency That Won't Disappear*. Among the findings were that a clear mission was lacking, and that a glaring deficiency was housing placement. Although the shelters were generally safe and health services received high marks, it was apparent that substance abuse services were more important than ever. In addition, facility conditions were poor and family reunification was given low priority. Slow privatization eroded staff morale. The report ended, “there must be a better way.”

In May 1999, WCC once again returned to the shelters and issued a report appropriately titled *Homeless Women, NY's Permanent Emergency*. In the past decade we had learned more about what to look for and that possibilities for improvement existed. We continued to be advocates of contracting out shelters to not for profits and for them to provide the needed services especially with the significant increase in substance abuse, mental illness and domestic abuse. More than ever we deplored the absence of affordable housing alternatives and supported additional rent subsidy programs. We urged jumpstarting the *NY NY II* agreement with the State providing more resources for mental illness. It was also imperative that more options should be available that would meet the different needs among the women such as group homes and shared housing with supervision.

Collaborative Efforts with New York City

In August of 1996, the WCC with the Office of Policy Management of the NYC Comptroller's Office issued a joint report titled *Review of the Foster Care Housing Subsidy Program*. We surveyed 65 not for profit agencies providing foster care to NYC children. The subsidy enacted by the New York State Legislature in 1988, had been poorly understood and significantly underutilized. The Foster Care Housing Subsidy provided a monthly cash grant for rent not to exceed \$300 per month in addition to the welfare shelter allowance. The survey responses demonstrated how the lack of affordable housing contributes to children both entering and remaining in foster care unnecessarily. "... some well beyond the time they were ready according to all other criteria, to be discharged into their parent's care."

Later in that year, in response to the findings of the report, the WCC organized a workshop-type meeting at WCC headquarters of representatives from the 65 agencies so they might be trained by city officials as to the most efficient ways to implement the subsidy. One of the major unexpected and valuable aspects of the meeting was the practical information exchanged among the participants as to their individual experiences with using the subsidy. They had never before met as a group.

IMPACT

WCC brought needed attention to the issue of "permanent emergency" of shelter. WCC's collaborative work resulted in a number of reforms, including:

- The City increasing the proportion of affordable housing set-aside for single adults
- The City ending the frequent shifting of shelter directors which had undermined the director's ability to develop working relationships with staff and the community. In addition, the City then initiated citywide meetings of directors and staff.
- City production of a Directory of Housing Resources for Homeless Women in response to the high demand for the WCC Directories.
- Foster Care Housing Subsidy Implementation: Foster care training in the use of the subsidy was expanded enabling increased numbers of children in foster care to be reunited with their parents and also saving the City costly foster care related expenses.
- Contracting out: By WCC focusing attention on the positive aspects of contracting out to not for profit agencies, the City contracted out all but two of the single homeless women's shelters and expanded the concept to other City agency programs.