Testimony of
Jenny Veloz, Disability Justice Advocate
On behalf of
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest
Before
The Council of the City of New York
General Welfare Oversight Hearing:
Shelter Accommodations and Services for Those with Disabilities

Good afternoon. My name is Jenny Veloz and I am an Advocate in the Disability Justice Program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI). Housing advocacy for people with disabilities is a critical part of our work. Thank you to Chairperson Stephen Levin and the Committee on General Welfare, as well as Chairperson Diana Ayala and the Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction, for the opportunity to present testimony today regarding shelter accommodations and services for persons with disabilities.

I. New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

For over 40 years, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) has been a leading civil rights and legal services advocate for New Yorkers marginalized by race, poverty, disability, and immigration status. Through our community lawyering model, we bridge the gap between traditional civil legal services and civil rights, building strength and capacity for both individual solutions and long-term impact. Our work integrates the power of individual legal services, impact litigation, and comprehensive organizing and policy campaigns. Guided by the priorities of our communities, we strive to achieve equality of opportunity and self-determination for people with disabilities, create equal access to health care, ensure immigrant opportunity, strengthen local nonprofits, and secure environmental justice for low-income communities of color.

II. NYLPI’s Disability Justice Program

NYLPI’s Disability Justice Program works to advance civil rights and ensure equality of opportunity, self-determination, and independence of New Yorkers with disabilities. NYLPI disability advocates have represented thousands of individuals and won campaigns improving the lives of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. We have long fought for equal access for persons with disabilities to government
services, including shelters, and fought disability-based discrimination in housing. NYLPI’s landmark housing victories include access to New York City Housing Authority housing for persons with disabilities, as well as ensuring that countless private landlords accommodate their tenants with disabilities.

Through our work, we have witnessed the impact inaccessible shelters have on families, where a member of the family has a disability. A mother living with her 18-year-old daughter, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, takes her daughter up and down the stairs every day in her wheelchair – all by herself – because the shelter does not have an accessible entrance. They have been in the shelter system for years and are having a challenging time finding an apartment because no one will accept their voucher. This mother does not have case management services to assist her in securing permanent housing for herself and her daughter. This is just one of many examples of how the shelter system is failing, not only individuals with disabilities, but their families as well.

III. The NYC Shelter System is Inaccessible to People who have Disabilities

There is an appalling lack of accessibility for people who have disabilities in the New York City shelter system. Individuals with physical, mental and intellectual disabilities are not provided the appropriate services and supports when in homeless shelters. People who use wheelchairs are placed in shelters that are wholly inaccessible. Federal, State and City law mandate equal access for persons with disabilities in shelters. Shelters are safe havens for people who do not have anywhere else to go. Shelters should be a stopgap measure, until permanent housing can be found. As such, accessibility in the shelter system should be the responsible agencies’ main priority. Not only would this allow people to go about their lives during their time in shelter, but would also ensure that people with disabilities are given an equal chance at finding permanent housing.

IV. The NYC Shelter System Fails to Assist People with Disabilities to Find Permanent Housing

Accessibility extends beyond physical modifications. Accessibility means providing resources, such as qualified counselors and case managers. Accessibility also means making sure that individuals (especially those with disabilities) are given the tools to maintain permanent housing, for example assisting with finding an apartment, assuring that individuals are not discriminated against because they have a voucher, and providing post-shelter case management to make sure that individuals remain self-sufficient and do not return to the shelters.
People in shelters are often given vouchers and told to look for apartments within a specified amount of time, usually without any guidance. Their attempts to find housing are unsuccessful because they are told by landlords, realtors, and management companies that vouchers will not be accepted. They are then forced to return to the shelters with no assistance on how to proceed. They have no recourse but to continue to stay in shelters for the unforeseeable future.

V. Recommendations

In order to ensure that New York City meets its obligation to ensure that people with disabilities in shelters are provided with equal access under the law, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest recommends:

Shelter Accessibility
- Contract only with accessible facilities
- Finance and incentivize construction to improve accessibility of current facilities
- Properly screen individuals to ensure that people with disabilities are sent to accessible shelters
- Develop protocols to respond to reasonable accommodation requests within the shelters

Voucher and Case Management Services
- Provide counseling for individuals with mental and intellectual disabilities
- Provide case management services during and after shelter stay (with emphasis on preventing discrimination based on voucher usage)
- Ensure HRA enforcement of vouchers by landlords and management companies
- Create a hotline to report landlords and management companies that do not accept vouchers

VI. Conclusion

Thank you for your efforts to ensure that for persons with disabilities in New York’s shelters receive appropriate services. I can be reached at (212) 244-4664 or
JVeloz@NYLPI.org, and I look forward to additional opportunities to work with you to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access to housing in New York City.

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