



coalition  
for the  
homeless

**Testimony of Coalition for the Homeless  
Before the Committee on Housing and Buildings  
and the Committee on Fire and Criminal Justice Services  
Concerning the City's Response to Illegal Use and Illegal Conversion**

**June 7, 2011**

**Submitted by  
Giselle Routhier, Policy Analyst  
Coalition for the Homeless**

We present this testimony on behalf of Coalition for the Homeless, a not-for-profit organization that assists more than 3,500 homeless New Yorkers each day. Since its founding in 1981, the Coalition has advocated for proven, cost-effective solutions to the crisis of modern homelessness, which now continues into its third decade. The Coalition has also struggled for more than 25 years to protect the rights of homeless people through litigation around the right to emergency shelter, the right to vote, and appropriate housing and services for homeless people living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

The Coalition operates several direct-services programs that offer vital services to homeless, at-risk, and formerly-homeless New Yorkers, and demonstrate effective long-term solutions. These programs include supportive housing for families and individuals living with AIDS, a job-training program for homeless and formerly-homeless women, a Rental Assistance Program which provides rent subsidies and support services to help working homeless individuals rent private-market apartments, and two buildings in Manhattan which provide permanent housing for formerly-homeless families and individuals. Our summer sleep-away camp and after-school program help hundreds of homeless children each year. The Coalition's mobile soup kitchen distributes 1,000 nutritious meals to street homeless and hungry New Yorkers each night. Finally, our Crisis Intervention Department assists more than 1,000 homeless and at-risk households each month with eviction prevention assistance, client advocacy, referrals for shelter and emergency food programs, and assistance with public benefits.

The Coalition also represents homeless men and women as plaintiffs in Callahan v. Carey and Eldredge v. Koch. In 1981 the City and State entered into a consent decree in Callahan in which it was agreed that, "The City defendants shall provide shelter and board to each homeless man who applies for it provided that (a) the man meets the need standard to qualify for the home relief program established in New York State; or (b) the man by reason to physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary shelter." The Callahan consent decree and Eldredge case also guarantee basic standards for shelters for homeless men and women. Pursuant to the decree, the Coalition serves as court-appointed monitor of municipal shelters for homeless adults.

### **Illegal Boarding Houses and Homeless Single Adults**

The Coalition for the Homeless welcomes the opportunity to testify regarding the City's response to illegal use and illegal conversion cases.

For many years, the Department of Homeless Services had referred thousands of homeless individuals—many of them living with mental illness and other disabilities—into illegally-converted boarding houses with hazardous conditions. These houses were typically one or two-family dwellings that had been converted to boarding houses by cramming bunk-beds into every corner of the building—sometimes upwards of 50 beds in one house, posing an array of serious safety concerns.

Last summer, the Department of Homeless Services implemented a system-wide rule, as well as a pilot program intended to reduce the number of referrals to these types of dwellings. The new rule prohibited referrals to buildings with one or more occupancy-related violations as listed on the Department of Buildings website. The pilot went even further, prohibiting referrals to buildings with one or more occupancy-related complaints.

So far, we have seen a marked decrease in the number of placements to these types of dwellings from the Department of Homeless Services. However, the success of the rule does rely in large part on the ability of the Department of Buildings to gain access and document occupancy-related violations. Indeed, we have seen that, in many cases, inspectors are routinely denied access to these buildings.

Since 2006, the Coalition for the Homeless has kept a record of addresses that we believed to be illegally-converted boarding houses, based on our own observations, client descriptions, and/or operator descriptions. We include that list of 197 addresses today as an attachment to our testimony, as well as other supporting documentation that provides context to this problem.

In conclusion, we recognize the need for better enforcement of illegally-converted buildings that pose health and safety hazards to many formerly-homeless individuals. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Council to address this need.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.