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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF THE SOCIAL WELFARE COMMITTEE AND  
EDUCATION AND THE LAW COMMITTEE**

**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE  
AND SUBCOMMITTEE ON ZONING AND FRANCHISES OVERSIGHT HEARING**

**BROADBAND AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

**OCTOBER 13, 2020**

The New York City Bar Association, through its Social Welfare Committee and Education and the Law Committee, submit this testimony to highlight the impact of the digital divide on New York City's homeless population.<sup>1</sup>

COVID-19 has exacerbated the homelessness crisis in New York City. The unprecedented public health emergency and resulting economic freefall deeply devastated the lives of homeless families and individuals. As of July 2020, there were 58,089 homeless people, including 13,046 homeless families with 19,278 homeless children, sleeping each night in the New York City municipal shelter system.<sup>2</sup> While state regulations require that certain services be provided to shelter residents, City-funded shelters overwhelmingly lack one essential service -- access to technology. Such access is essential to reduce the length of residents' stay and facilitate their exit into permanent housing. The need to communicate through internet-based applications is particularly acute right now. Access to everything from city offices and classrooms to real estate listings and governmental offices is accessible online, and such online access is preferred and is safer, preventing unnecessary in-person contact.

Yet thousands of shelter residents lack basic access to the internet. The City Bar documented this problem. In May 2020, the City Bar Justice Center (CBJC) released a Report titled "Homeless Need Internet Access To Find a Home: How Access to Internet and Technology Resources can Support Homeless Families Transition out of Homeless Shelters" (the Report). This report and its recommendations are endorsed by a wide range of organizations, including law firms, legal services providers, corporations, and community groups. A copy of the report and an

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<sup>1</sup> Oral testimony provided by Sandra Gresl of the Social Welfare Committee.

<sup>2</sup> "Basic Facts About Homelessness: New York City," Coalition for the Homeless, <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/> (all websites last visited Oct. 1, 2020).

endorsement list is annexed hereto.<sup>3</sup> The Report lays bare the devastating consequences of New York City’s stark digital divide on the lives of our unhoused neighbors. Without reliable internet access, shelter residents are unable to search and apply for permanent housing, search and apply for jobs, participate in remote classrooms and complete assigned homework, apply for government benefits, obtain necessary medical and mental health care, stay connected to friends and family or even access basic entertainment.

Allowing the lack of access to remain unaddressed is unacceptable. The pandemic has significantly exacerbated the barriers resulting from the City’s digital divide, raising the stakes to literally life-or-death. Homeless parents are forced to risk their child’s health and safety for the sake of their education or subject them to a subpar educational experience with either limited or inconsistent access to remote learning. With no internet access in shelters and unreliable internet-enabled devices, Wi-Fi, and connections, in person learning is the only viable option for their children to receive an education.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the pandemic, 87% of the students who experienced homelessness were more likely to drop out of school.<sup>5</sup> Only 57% of homeless City students graduated from high school.<sup>6</sup> One in four homeless students was proficient in math and science overall, compared to a third or more of housed low-income students.<sup>7</sup> These numbers will only worsen from the pandemic. Experts predict that students could lose seven to eleven months of learning, if remote learning is done until January 2021.<sup>8</sup>

Ensuring internet access for homeless New Yorkers is also an issue of racial justice. New Yorkers of color are disproportionately represented among those experiencing homelessness. Eighty-six percent of homeless single adults and 93% of heads-of-household in family shelters identify as Black or Hispanic – significantly higher than the 53% of New York City’s population overall who identify as Black or Hispanic.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, 85% of New York City students who experienced homelessness were Black and Hispanic.<sup>10</sup> Black and Hispanic New Yorkers generally, and homeless New Yorkers specifically, have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

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<sup>3</sup> Report available online at <https://www.citybarjusticecenter.org/news/homeless-need-internet-access-to-find-a-home-the-city-bar-justice-center-documents-lack-of-technology-in-nyc-homeless-shelters/>; list of endorsing organizations available at <http://documents.nycbar.org/files/CBJCInternetAccessHomelessSheltersEndorsingOrgs.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Eliza Shapiro, “These Families Feel Forgotten as N.Y.C. Pushes to Open Schools,” The N.Y. Times, Sept. 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/14/nyregion/homeless-school-reopening-nyc.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Fregni, “What Homeless Students Lose When Schools Go Digital,” Teach for America, July, 1, 2020, <https://www.teachforamerica.org/stories/what-homeless-students-lose-when-schools-go-digital>.

<sup>6</sup> “New Data Show Number of NYC Students who are Homeless Topped 100,000 for Fourth Consecutive Year,” Advocates for Children, Oct. 28, 2019, <https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/node/1403>.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah D. Sparks, “Number of Homeless Students Hits All-Time High,” Education Week, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/02/12/number-of-homeless-students-hits-all-time-high.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, “COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime,” McKinsey & Company, June 1, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>.

<sup>9</sup> State of the Homeless 2020, Coalition for the Homeless, March 2020, available at <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/StateofTheHomeless2020.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 6.

Any policy that enables homeless New Yorkers to prevent increased exposure to COVID by affirmatively bridging the digital divide they face, is an essential step to address racial disparities in New York City.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

New York City has long been a leader in ensuring that its homeless residents have access to shelter, and these times demand that the City now lead the way in providing technology access to its shelter residents. We are dealing with a public health emergency, and it is clear that the City must act quickly in order to meet its basic responsibilities to its unhoused residents. The Mayor's Office released an "Internet Master Plan," a city-wide plan to increase the availability of Internet throughout its five boroughs. However, that plan does not include a single reference to shelters or the unique access needs of our City's unhoused residents.<sup>11</sup> The plan ignores the homeless population. In July the City announced it would be accelerating broadband deployment in all five boroughs, prioritizing public housing communities, which have suffered disproportionately during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup> That announcement also failed to explicitly indicate that City-funded properties serving as shelters would be included. We appreciate the extraordinary efforts the City is taking to respond to the crisis - the pandemic has, and will continue to, expose the cracks in our systems that disadvantage our most vulnerable populations. It is vital that the City ensure that the thousands of New Yorkers who are homeless and residing in shelters are included in these plans.<sup>13</sup>

We urge the City Council to help address this digital divide and work with the Mayor's Office and all related agencies to ensure that City-funded homeless shelters are prioritized in any plans to expand broadband and internet access. This includes providing access to the following in every City shelter:

- Reliable Wi-Fi connections for all shelter residents;
- Updated Internet-ready computers, tablets, or other devices;
- Wireless or Bluetooth printers with scanners, or printers that maintain connections with the shelter's computers, tablets or other word processing devices.

This must be a sustained commitment and we strongly urge the City Council to consult with all stake holders as it devises a plan to provide internet access in shelters.

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Thank you for your service to New Yorkers during these challenging times. We look forward to working with you to help meet this moment.

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<sup>11</sup> The New York City Internet Master Plan, NYC Mayor's Office for Technology, Jan. 2020, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cto/#/project/internet-master-plan>.

<sup>12</sup> Mayor de Blasio and Taskforce on Racial Inclusion and Equity Announce Accelerated Internet Master Plan to Support Communities Hardest-Hit by COVID-19, July 7, 2020, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/499-20/mayor-de-blasio-taskforce-racial-inclusion-equity-accelerated-internet-master>.

<sup>13</sup> This includes all properties and temporary housing facilities (including hotels) that are maintained by New York City agencies.

The logo for the City Bar Justice Center, featuring the text "CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER" in a serif font, centered between two horizontal white bars.

CITY BAR  
JUSTICE  
CENTER

# HOMELESS NEED INTERNET ACCESS TO FIND A HOME

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How Access to Internet and Technology  
Resources Can Support Homeless Families  
Transition out of Homeless Shelters

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MAY 2020

The logo for the City Bar Justice Center, featuring the text "CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER" in a serif font, centered between two horizontal bars.

City Bar Justice Center  
42 West 44th Street  
New York, NY 10036  
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## ABOUT THE CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER

The City Bar Justice Center (CBJC), the largest division of the City Bar Fund which is the nonprofit affiliate of the New York City Bar Association, increases access to justice for low-income and disadvantaged New Yorkers by leveraging the volunteered time and expertise of the New York City legal community through an effective pro bono model. CBJC responds to the emerging needs of underserved communities, assisting over 25,000 New Yorkers annually through limited and direct legal representation, community outreach, and education efforts on a wide range of civil-justice matters including: homelessness, immigration, veterans assistance, small business development, consumer issues, planning and estates, cancer advocacy, and elderlaw. A dozen core projects led by experts in the field, over 1,500 pro bono attorneys trained and mentored by staff, and the largest free civil legal hotline in New York enable the CBJC to protect the rights, safety, and security of people without the means or support necessary to navigate our justice system.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is a project of the City Bar Justice Center's Legal Clinic for the Homeless ("LCH") which is responsible for its content. It represents a collective effort that would not have been possible but for the generous contributions of CBJC and LCH Leadership and Staff, as well the generous contributions of our volunteers, including several members of the Legal Department of BNY Mellon, listed below, who assisted significantly to the research and writing of the report. Below is a list of individuals who contributed to the content of the report:

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In New York City (“NYC”) during the 2018 fiscal year, 133,284 different homeless men, women, and children slept in the NYC municipal shelter system, including over 45,600 different homeless NYC children.[1] As recently as September 2019, an average of 62,391 homeless people, including 14,962 homeless families with 22,083 homeless children, slept each night in the NYC municipal shelter system. While NYC homeless shelters provide temporary housing for these individuals, the ultimate goal of the NYC Department of Homeless Services (“DHS”) is to prevent homelessness, to help residents regain permanent housing, and to reduce residents' lengths of stay in a shelter.[2]

However, NYC shelters are currently lacking one very basic and essential service that would help shelter residents to secure permanent housing and reduce their lengths of stay in a shelter: access to technology. Today, access to the Internet is considered a basic human right that includes the technology that will enable it.[3] Access to the Internet and the required technology to do so is critical for shelter residents to locate permanent housing and job opportunities, and to access applications for housing, government benefits[4] and other services.

In 2019, the City Bar Justice Center (“CBJC”) conducted a client survey of current and former NYC family-shelter residents in Manhattan and the Bronx. They found that if shelter residents had access to the Internet while in the shelter, they would use the Internet for the following purposes: finding permanent housing (70%), finding a job (60%), finding medical care (63%), accessing other benefits such as unemployment, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, Medicaid (45%), access to email (67%) and social networking (74%). Survey respondents indicated that access to the Internet would positively impact their lives.



Respondents also confirmed that the lack of Internet access led to further isolation and frustrated attempts to search for permanent housing, jobs, and other essential benefits.

Cities across the United States have recognized that Internet access is critical for shelter residents. A synopsis of their efforts and how it can be applied in NYC is discussed below. An investment by NYC and DHS in enhancing access to technology (including Wi-Fi, Internet-ready devices and printers) in NYC shelters could lead to a reduction in the overall homeless population and a reduction in other costs associated with housing NYC's homeless population. This report outlines the ways in which DHS's mission can be better achieved.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The City Bar Justice Center recommends that New York City provide access to the following in every City shelter: (1) reliable Wi-Fi connections, (2) updated Internet-ready computers, tablets, or other word processing devices, and (3) Wireless or Bluetooth printers, or printers that maintain connection with the shelter's computers, tablets or other word processing devices. Access means that the Wi-Fi and devices must be made available to residents and in working order. Access also includes availability for individuals with both traditional and non-traditional school or work schedules, as well as all tools that are essential for use, such as paper and ink for printers, adequate charging facilities for Internet-ready devices, and word processing software.





## IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY FOR HOMELESS SHELTER RESIDENTS

DHS oversees approximately 580 shelter facilities across the five boroughs.[5] On each night in December 2019, these shelters housed an average of 62,590 homeless people. [6] In 2017, NYC spent \$1.3 billion on family and single adult shelter services, a sum larger than outlays on libraries and parks combined.[7] This amount excludes hundreds of millions of additional dollars spent on homeless prevention efforts aimed at reducing the number of people entering shelters and rental-subsidy programs to facilitate exits from shelters.[8] In total, it is estimated that NYC is currently spending in excess of \$2 billion on these services.[9]

While NYC homeless shelters provide temporary housing for individuals, the mission of DHS is to prevent homelessness and to help NYC residents regain independent living in the community.[10] In a recent “Mayor’s Management Report,” DHS stated that one of its overarching goals is to “help individuals and families transition to permanent housing and self-sufficiency.”[11] This means that the agency must not only ensure that “all temporary shelters for homeless individuals and families are clean, safe,

“and well-run,” but also that it “[f]acilitate exits and minimize clients’ length of stay in shelters.”[12]

Despite that goal, statistics show that between December 2017 and September 2019, the number of adults and children in shelters increased by 2,458, or 4.1%.[13] In addition, as of December 2017, single adults were staying in a shelter approximately 100 days longer than they were, on average, in January 2014; and 37 days in the case of adult families (couples without children).[14]

Both family and single adult shelter clients must develop, with the provider staff, an Independent Living Plan (ILP). [15] The ILP forms are the core of a client’s “[shelter] exit plan and an individualized pathway towards sustainable permanency.”[16] But while state regulations require that certain services be provided to shelter clients, shelters are overwhelmingly lacking in one essential service for shelter residents which could reduce the length of residents’ stay and facilitate their exit: access to technology.

A vital component to independent living in today’s world is the Internet,

and NYC and DHS should strive to provide resources to homeless shelters to ensure that homeless men, women, and children in NYC are able to access the Internet. Internet access should be provided through Internet-ready mobile devices, computers and printers, as well as through shelter-based publicly available Wi-Fi, at no extra cost to maximize opportunities for the homeless population to regain independence.

NYC residents now use the Internet for almost every aspect of their daily life—to communicate with others (whether family or friends, or for educational or work purposes), to search for jobs, to create resumes for jobs, to apply for jobs, to search for housing, to apply for housing, to access government benefits and services, to search for educational opportunities, to complete applications for schools, to perform school work, to find medical providers, to access banking services, and much more. Widespread Internet use pervades all social and income classes and is particularly needed by the homeless, who lack a permanent address and landline telephone and require, perhaps more than others, the stability that is provided by Internet access.

Shelter residents need to be able to access the Internet to search for jobs, housing, medical care, and other benefits.

Shelter residents with children, who are a large percentage of the overall homeless population, need the Internet to help their children enroll and remain in school and perform schoolwork. In March 2020, the impact that lack of Internet access has on children in homeless shelters was further evidenced and exacerbated when, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, NYC public schools implemented remote learning. Unfortunately, over 100,000 students living in shelters or unstable housing in NYC were not able to benefit from this set up due to limited access to technology.[17] While the Department of Education is working to provide Internet – enabled devices with cellular technology, such as iPads, students have lost weeks of remote learning time waiting for such a device. [18]

The Internet is an invaluable resource for helping homeless residents return to self-sufficiency. Its potential uses and benefits are innumerable. A modest investment by NYC in enhanced Internet access could lead to a reduction in the overall homeless population and a reduction in other costs associated with housing NYC's homeless population. NYC needs to provide more resources to homeless shelter residents to access technology by providing access to Internet-ready mobile devices, computers and printers, and shelter-based publicly available Wi-Fi.

We propose that NYC set aside funds for enhanced technology access for shelter residents to facilitate the overarching goal of NYC homeless shelters—that they provide a temporary stopping point on a path toward self-sufficiency and independence.

## SURVEY RESULTS

During the summer of 2019, the CBJC conducted a survey of current and former NYC homeless shelter residents to obtain information about their access to and use of Internet-ready devices and Wi-Fi while living in NYC shelters (“2019 CBJC Survey”). The results of the 2019 CBJC Survey are summarized below and confirm, among other things, that (1) NYC shelters do not currently provide adequate access to the Internet (in fact, the majority do not provide any access to either Internet-ready devices or Wi-Fi), (2) most shelter residents are not able to otherwise regularly access the Internet on their own and when they do, it requires them to self-fund costly cellular plans with funds that could be put to better use elsewhere, and (3) all shelter residents confirmed that improved access to the Internet would enable them to improve their living conditions and return to self-sufficiency.

**In total, CBJC surveyed 84 current and former NYC family-shelter residents in Manhattan and the Bronx. The surveyed residents had the following to say:**

**67%**

**WANTED TO  
BUT HAD NO  
REGULAR  
ACCESS TO  
INTERNET**

56 survey respondents (67% of those surveyed) indicated that there were times when they wanted to access the Internet while in shelters, but were unable to do so, because the shelters did not provide Internet access and the residents were not able to get access via other means. Only 10 respondents reported having regular (i.e., daily) access to the Internet while staying in the shelter.

**6%**

**WERE ABLE TO  
ACCESS THE  
INTERNET  
THROUGH  
THEIR  
SHELTER**

Only 5 respondents (6% of those surveyed) reported being able to access the Internet through the NYC homeless shelter(s) in which they stayed. In contrast, to the extent that respondents were able to access Internet at certain points, the majority did so through a self-paid cellular plan (64 respondents, or 76% of those surveyed, reported having such a plan at some point or another) or through publicly available Wi-Fi, e.g., Wi-Fi available in NYC public spaces, libraries, or restaurants like McDonald’s and Starbucks. For those residents with smart phones and self-paid cellular plans, 18% of those surveyed reported having limits on minutes or data for those plans that sometimes restricted their ability to access the Internet, despite having an Internet-ready device.

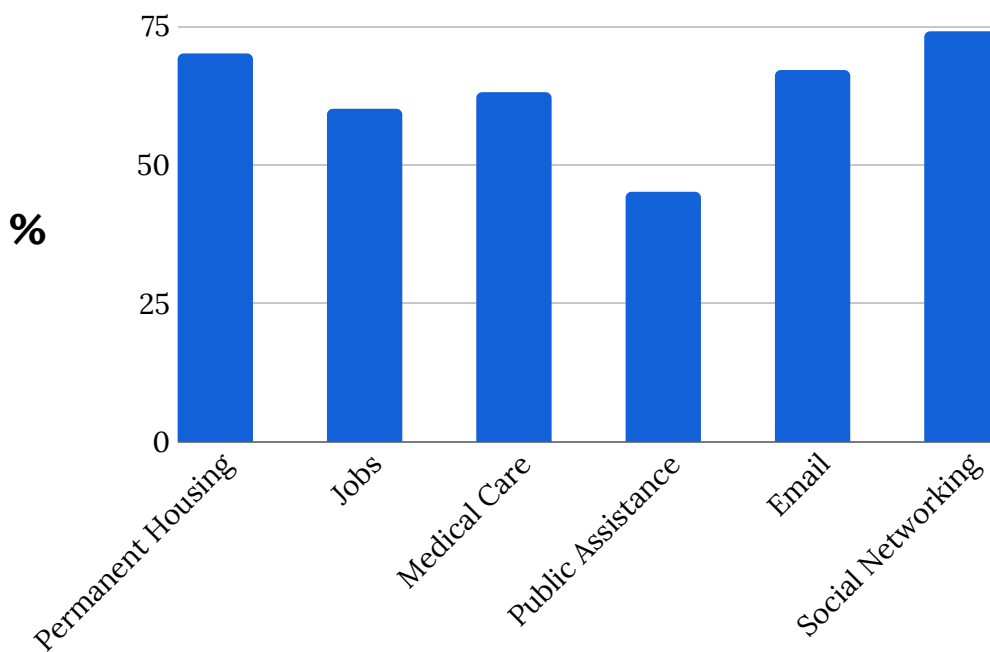
**75%**

**AGREED  
INTERNET ACCESS  
WOULD IMPROVE  
THEIR  
CIRCUMSTANCES**

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents (63 respondents, or 75% of those surveyed) agreed that regular or otherwise improved access to the Internet for shelter residents would enable shelter residents to improve their circumstances, assisting in their efforts to find permanent housing, jobs, and other benefits (discussed further below). The CBJC Survey established that an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were comfortable using the Internet, affirming its relevance in their daily lives.

Based on their familiarity with the Internet, respondents said that if they had access to the Internet while in NYC shelters, they would use the Internet for the following purposes:

**What Respondents Would Use Internet For**



The 2019 CBJC Survey results present a clear picture of the current state of technology access at NYC homeless shelters: NYC shelters do not provide adequate (and in most cases, any) access to the Internet for NYC shelter residents. NYC shelter residents are in a constant struggle to find ways to access the Internet through other means, including spending what little funds they do have on Internet access. This lack of Internet access denies shelter residents of the many benefits that Internet access could bring, including resources that could help residents on the road to self-sufficiency and independence and to help residents retain some sense of normalcy and permanence in the midst of what is a very stressful experience.

As part of the 2019 CBJC Survey, CBJC also solicited personal anecdotes from the respondents describing how regular and improved access to the Internet would positively impact their lives. Respondents confirmed that the lack of Internet led to further isolation and frustrated their attempts to search for permanent housing, jobs, and other benefits. One respondent noted that “the Internet is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity.” Respondents noted that shelter residents “need the Internet in order to search for apartments” and “need the Internet to find a job.” Residents indicated that with Internet access, they “might have been living in an apartment sooner,” and “having Internet service would have helped [them] get access to a better job.” One respondent actually noted that “the only reason [they] got out of shelter was because [a self-funded Wi-Fi] HotSpot let [them] find out about Housing Connect [19], [but] a lot of shelter residents don’t even know that exists.”

In contrast, the lack of Internet limits those opportunities. One resident noted that the lack of Internet potentially cost them a job, stating, “It’s like living in the dark ages here. I had interviews at [a company] and they were saying I was unresponsive but I wasn’t. The issue was that I did not have Internet.” As one resident put it, Internet access would provide a round-the-clock resource for information and assistance:

*“Internet would give you access to everything you need whenever you want. Some case workers only work 9 to 5 so if I needed to search stuff at night to ask them about I could not. I learned how to get out of my situation by reading blogs and joining forums after I got [out]of the shelter. Unfortunately, people in shelter don't have access to that and it's sad.”*

Some residents reported being unable to pay for their own Internet service, meaning that without the assistance of the shelter or finding a place with publicly available Wi-Fi, it would be impossible for them to access the Internet. But even for those residents who could afford to pay for Internet access, the need to pay for Internet on their own deprived them of valuable funds that they could have put to other vital uses, like housing. Respondents reported using their very limited public assistance benefits intended for food and other essential items to pay for internet-enabled phones. Respondents noted that “it would be nice to get free Internet so [they] wouldn’t have to use the little funds [they] have” on Internet access,” and “access to Internet at the shelter would have saved [them] money because then [they] would not need to pay for a data plan.” Because money is always a struggle for shelter residents, there are inevitably times when they cannot pay for Internet access and, as a result, cannot access

the Internet. One respondent noted, “I would run out of funds to pay my phone bill so I would not have Internet.”

Beyond the benefits in terms of exit strategy and financial savings, residents also commented on the inability of their children to complete homework assignments while in the shelters due to the lack of adequate technology access, including Internet and printers that are needed for schoolwork. For example, one resident noted:

*“Internet in shelter would help me do homework with my child. And it would also help because sometimes I need to print out forms but I can't do that and the case workers are not always available.”*

Another respondent said something similar:

*“My husband and I were discussing Internet service in the shelter a few days ago and wondered if the social worker would be kind enough to give us the Wi-Fi password so we could help our kids do homework.”*

Based on the survey results and sample anecdotes summarized above, it is clear that more must be done in terms of technology access at NYC's homeless shelters. As discussed further below, we believe that NYC and DHS should enhance access to technology at NYC homeless shelters through both Internet-ready devices and publicly available Wi-Fi, as well as access to wireless or Bluetooth printers, or those that are connected to the shelter's functioning and accessible computers.

## WHAT OTHER CITIES ARE DOING

NYC has long been a leader in providing temporary shelter to homeless residents. NYC now has an opportunity to lead the way in modernizing those efforts by providing technology access to its residents through the provision of Internet-ready devices and Wi-Fi to all municipal shelter residents. Similar efforts have begun in a limited number of cities across the United States, which recognize that technology access can be a turning point for homeless residents and which can serve as a start for efforts in the five boroughs. Below are a few examples of what other cities have done. More is needed and NYC can be a leader in these efforts.

In other U.S. cities, the views of homeless shelter residents with respect to technology access largely mirror the results of the 2019 CBJC Survey.

## San Francisco

Shelter residents in San Francisco, particularly younger shelter residents, for example, cite smartphones and Internet access as the reason for shortened periods of homelessness.[20] Technology is used for connecting with social services, job searches, and finding permanent housing. One non-profit shelter, NextDoor, was able to get online for only \$6,000 (approximately) of equipment supplied by a local Internet provider.[21] In 2016, a former NextDoor resident who spearheaded the initiative to get the shelter online co-founded a nonprofit, ShelterTech, to further help underserved communities get technology access and accelerate out of homelessness.[22] In 2017, ShelterTech received a grant of \$97,454 for three years from the San Francisco government. ShelterTech is using the funds to provide various technology services to shelters and single room occupancy hotels.

ShelterTech focuses on three programs: (1) Shelter Connect, a program that works with Internet service providers to provide free Wi-Fi in shelters and transitional housing facilities, (2) an online housing and human services directory, and (3) step-by-step guides addressing common issues faced by homeless or at-risk individuals. [23]

ShelterTech expanded its Wi-Fi installations by 228% in 2018 and provided Wi-Fi access to 3,000 people through 7 Wi-Fi installations (including at 3 emergency shelters) and 200 portable chargers. ShelterTech's website indicated costs of only \$50 per month to provide Wi-Fi to one shelter and \$0.02 for Wi-Fi for one person for one night.[24]

Some residents of Wi-Fi connected shelters in San Francisco have credited their ability to find and obtain jobs online to simply having access to websites like Indeed.com and Craigslist.com.[25] Residents would not have known that some of these jobs existed without the Internet, as many jobs are posted solely online.[26]

## Austin

Austin is another city that has sought to expand the services that it provides to its homeless population through the use of technology. According to the Ending Community Homeless Coalition ("ECHO"), a non-profit organization that plans and implements strategies to end homelessness in Austin and surrounding Travis County, over 7,000 individuals experienced homelessness in Travis County in 2018.[27]

In an effort to improve the lives of its homeless residents, the City of Austin's Office of Design, Technology, and Innovation Projects (the "Innovation Office") developed the MyPass Platform ("MyPass").[28] The project utilizes blockchain in order to give homeless people the ability to digitally store their vital documents, such as social security cards, health data and driver licenses, which "will positively impact homelessness services by helping them gain efficiency".[29] The Innovation Office's website states that its parameters of success for MyPass are efficiency of social service delivery, increased control and agency for homeless people, and to assist with benefit eligibility determinations for homeless residents.[30] The Innovation Office received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in June 2019 to develop MyPass over the course of one year.[31] Though MyPass undoubtedly will provide essential autonomy over to Austin's homeless residents, it is important to recognize that the use of this service assumes that its users already have access to Internet.

### What NYC is Currently Doing

NYC has made a city-wide plan to increase the availability of Internet throughout its five boroughs, though this effort was not directed toward its homeless population. There is no current requirement for NYC homeless shelters, or for NYC itself, to provide access to technology to its homeless residents. In 2016, Mayor de Blasio announced the public launch of LinkNYC, which would transform the thousands of old payphones in NYC into hubs for free public Wi-Fi, phone calls, and device charging as well as tablet access to city services, maps and directions.[32] Though the stated goal of LinkNYC is "leveling the playing field and providing every New Yorker with access to the most important tool of the 21st century,"[33] within months after launch, "repeated complaints"[34] arose from NYC's sheltered residents because "some users"(35) were "monopolizing" the LinkNYC browsers for their personal use. The web browsers that were initially installed on the LinkNYC kiosks were subsequently disabled, and the extent of LinkNYC's permissible browsing currently is for "maps and city services".[36]

As the LinkNYC website describes, "[t]here are millions of people in New York City who don't have access to high-speed internet... LinkNYC's advertising platform also generates millions of dollars in revenue for New York City." [37] Providing a most basic service, access to technology, to homeless shelters would not generate millions of dollars in revenue for NYC, but it would give NYC's homeless population a chance to maintain autonomy over their lives. Moreover, the ability to use the provided technology to search and apply for housing, employment and government benefits would reduce these residents' stay in homeless shelters over time.



Perhaps then Mayor de Blasio's goal of "leveling the playing field"[38] could be achieved.

Additionally, as discussed below, free public Wi-Fi alone, while helpful, is not sufficient. The cost of providing NYC homeless shelters with up-to-date technology available to all residents is greatly outweighed by the benefits and can often be the key difference in a person's path out of homelessness.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable homeless shelter residents to secure permanent housing and significantly reduce the length of stay in a shelter, NYC should supply every shelter with reliable Wi-Fi, modern and accessible Internet-ready devices, and wireless, Bluetooth or otherwise connected printers. Access to technology means that Wi-Fi and the devices must be available to residents and in working order. Access also includes availability for individuals with both traditional and non-traditional school or work schedules, as well as all tools that are essential for use, such as paper and ink for printers, adequate charging facilities for Internet-ready devices, and word processing software.

### Access to technology furthers the goals of NYC and DHS:

- 01 BASIC NEEDS**  
Including food, shower, safety, Internet
- 02 HOUSING**  
Ultimate goal is to find permanent accommodations
- 03 JOB**  
A job and access to financial resources ensures they won't lose permanent accommodations once they find it [36]
- 04 WELL-BEING (PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH):**  
Use of Internet for social interaction and entertainment (for parents, entertained children enables them to look for housing/jobs)

Access to technology cannot be limited only to Wi-Fi, onsite Internet-ready devices or printers, as each prong alone is not sufficient. As outlined in the 2019 CBJC Survey, while many shelter residents have smartphones through savings, phone-sharing, and programs like Lifeline[40], they often do not have access to sufficient data plans.[41] Without adequate data plans, users are unable to fully leverage the Internet and Internet-based applications.

Smartphones and Wi-Fi availability are not sufficient for many homeless shelter residents. Residents experience difficulty in completing applications on handheld devices and certain websites are not fully available on mobile devices. Furthermore, smartphones offer limited options to word processing applications needed to create resumes or complete homework assignments. Shelter residents also lack the ability to print applications that cannot be submitted online and

homework to submit to school where Internet-ready devices, Wi-Fi and printers are unavailable.

## CONCLUSION

As homelessness has continued to grow in the past decade, NYC and DHS can no longer focus only on temporary housing. Efforts must be made to reduce the time spent in shelters and the costs associated with longer periods of homelessness. Our recommendation that NYC should provide access day and evening hours to (1) reliable Wi-Fi, (2) updated Internet-ready devices, and (3) wireless or Bluetooth printers, or printers that are otherwise connected to Internet-ready devices, in every shelter is in line with the goals of NYC and DHS and the needs voiced by shelter residents. This is an opportunity for NYC to tackle the homeless epidemic in a non-traditional way and be a leader on this frontier.



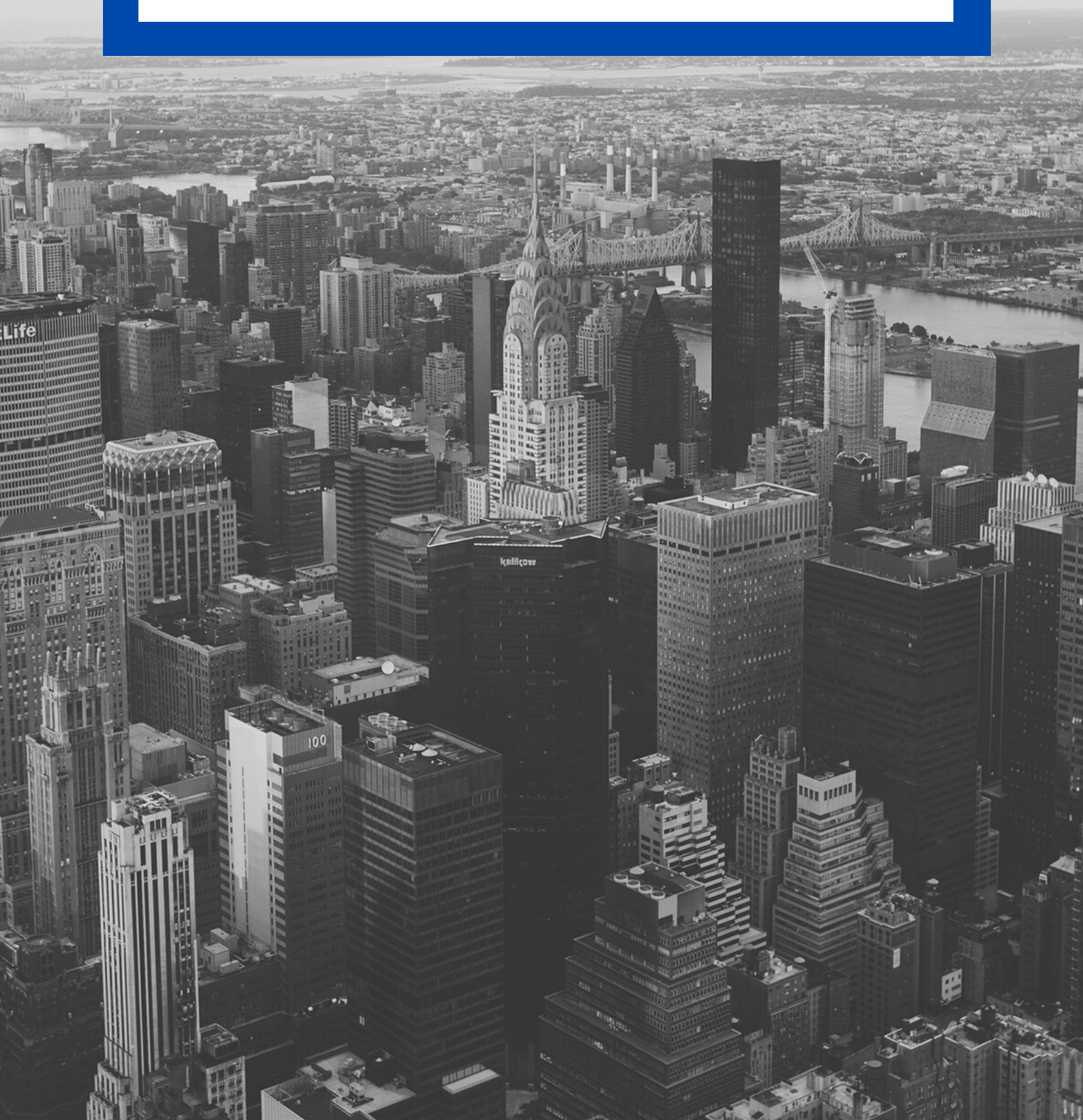
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# HOMELESS NEED INTERNET ACCESS TO FIND A HOME

How Access to Internet and Technology Resources Can Support Homeless Families Transition out of Homeless Shelters

A Report from the City Bar Justice Center | May 2020

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- Brooklyn Defender Services
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- Coalition for Homeless Youth
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