Testimony before the

New York State Assembly
Standing Committee on Corporations, Authorities, and Commissions

on the
Need for Broadband Access
in Homeless Shelters

January 8, 2026

Reliable internet connectivity is a necessity, not a luxury, for all aspects of our modern life. This is no less true for people living in homeless shelters. Giving people consistent access to reliable high-speed internet is one of the easiest things we can do to increase opportunities for some of the most marginalized members of our society. Without reliable internet access, shelter residents cannot search and apply for permanent housing or jobs, participate in remote classrooms or complete assigned homework, apply for government benefits, stay connected to friends and family, obtain necessary medical care, or access critical legal services.

The mission of the State of New York ConnectAll Office ("ConnectAll") is to bring broadband to unserved, underserved, and Community Anchor Institutions ("CAIs"). In order to access federal funding, ConnectAll was required to submit a Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment Initial Proposal ("BEAD Proposal"), which identified eligible Community Anchor Institutions ("CAI"). The first volume of the BEAD Proposal listed Homeless shelters as a CAI, elaborating that, "[s]helters and homeless service facilities are a critical resource for providing digital access to individuals who do not have reliable access to a home broadband subscription."[1]

Despite this initial acknowledgement of the importance of shelters as a critical resource for people with broadband, homeless shelters have been left out of the conversation, despite serving over a hundred thousand people each year. As of September 2025, there were 103,142 people sleeping each night in the New York City municipal shelter system, alone.[2] According to the

[1] https://broadband.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/03/nys-initial-proposal-vol.-1-approved.pdf at 11
[2] https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/facts-about-homelessness/

New York State Comptroller, there are 127,759 year-round emergency housing beds across the State.[3]

Yet, shelter regulations do not require WiFi to be provided to shelter residents. Internet access is an essential tool that could reduce the length of residents' stays and facilitate their successful exit into permanent housing by helping them advocate for themselves and accessing vital resources in order to self-actualize. 75% of NYC shelter residents surveyed agreed that internet access would help improve their living circumstances.[4] Further, survey respondents noted that if they had access to the internet while in the homeless shelter, they would use the internet to find permanent housing, find a job, access other benefits such as unemployment, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, seek medical care, doing schoolwork, and basic communications such as accessing email and social networking. Giving people the ability to access the online resources they need to exit shelter ultimately results in cost-savings when people can exit shelter more quickly.

Many critical services have become reliant on internet-based platforms as we have moved to a hybrid world post-COVID. Everything from legal services and virtual court appearances to counseling and telehealth is now offered remotely and often preferred by service providers. Poor or no internet connectivity leaves many shelter residents unable to effectively participate in services needed for their well-being. This includes medical devices reliant on internet access, such as heart monitoring devices. Without internet access, these devices cannot send critical real-time data to doctors.

It is now difficult to access public benefits without the internet, as in-person options have been vastly reduced. New York City's Housing Connect portal to access affordable housing is only available online. As the federal government moves forward with work requirements for SNAP, people receiving those benefits will be required to regularly submit documentation of their work activity. Without access to the internet to comply with these onerous regulations, more people will lose their benefits. When reliable internet access is not available in shelters, people need to use their extremely limited financial resources to buy monthly cellular data plans or utilize free public WiFi (e.g., in public spaces, libraries, or coffee shops). This modest access is insufficient and impractical.

Self-paid cellular plans often include limits on minutes or data and may not work in shelters with bad cell service, and many people cannot afford data plans. Public WiFi does not provide the data protection or privacy needed to conduct sensitive personal business, in particular, for things like telehealth visits or privileged conversations with a lawyer. Shelter residents do their best to make use of libraries, but many shelters are not close to community resources and public assistance benefits are insufficient to cover transportation to and from the library each day.

[3] https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/pdf/new-yorkers-in-need-homelessness-nys.pdf
[4] https://www.nycbar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Wifi4Homeless-2021-Report.pdf

This is not just an issue of technology access; it is also an issue of racial justice. New Yorkers of color are disproportionately represented among those experiencing homelessness. Eighty-eight percent of homeless single adults and heads-of-household in family shelters identify as Black or Hispanic. An estimated 56% of single adults sleeping in DHS shelters are Black, compared with 24% of the New York City population. Any policy that bridges the digital divide for homeless New Yorkers is an essential step to address racial disparities in both the City and the State.

The State has already made a significant and important contribution to closing the digital divide by creating and investing in the ConnectAll Office. We ask that shelter residents not be left out of that important work. We urge ConnectAll to consider the unique circumstances facing homeless New Yorkers and make an explicit public commitment to incorporate homeless shelters into its mandate to bring broadband to unserved, underserved, and CAIs. Our organizations have supported State legislation (A.1755 (AM Reyes) / S.8026 (Sen. Gonzalez)) that would ensure reliable, privacy-preserving, high-speed internet access for all individuals residing in temporary housing, with funding for internet service provided under the ConnectAll digital equity grant program.

While we believe this legislation is critical to ensuring that shelters provide internet access to residents at a reliable speed and with data privacy protections, we encourage ConnectAll to incorporate shelters into existing or future plans aimed at expanding broadband access to close the digital divide. ConnectAll is receiving $20 million from Verizon, as part of the approval by the Public Service Commission of Verizon's petition to take over Frontier Communications. This is a unique opportunity to use a portion of these one-time unrestricted funds to support the capital costs of installation of Wi-Fi at shelters statewide and close the digital divide for people at the critical point of trying to secure housing.

New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and residing in temporary housing facilities are some of our state's most vulnerable residents, and it is critical that New York State ensure homeless shelter residents are provided access to the internet.

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On behalf of:

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New York City Bar Association
New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU)
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