

Hidden City

**New York has more homeless than it has in decades.
What should the next mayor do?**

by [Ian Frazier](#) October 28, 2013

For baseball games, Yankee Stadium seats 50,287. If all the homeless people who now live in New York City used the stadium for a gathering, several thousand of them would have to stand. More people in the city lack homes than at any time since . . . It's hard to say exactly.



Marcus (Country) Springs, across from the Bedford-Atlantic men's shelter, described by people in soup-kitchen lines as one of the worst in the city. "They treat you like an inmate," Springs said.

Photograph by Ashley Gilbertson.

The Coalition for the Homeless, a leading advocate for homeless people in the city and the state, says that these numbers have not been seen in New York since the Great Depression. The Bloomberg administration replies that bringing the Depression into it is wildly unfair, because those times were much worse, and, besides, for complicated reasons, you're comparing apples and oranges. The C.F.H. routinely disagrees with Mayor Bloomberg, and vice versa; of the many disputes the two sides have had, this is among the milder. In any case, it's inescapably true that there are far more homeless people in the city today than there have been since "modern homelessness" (as experts refer to it) began, back in the nineteen-seventies.

Most New Yorkers I talk to do not know this. They say they thought there were fewer homeless people than before, because they see fewer of them. In fact, during the twelve years of the Bloomberg administration, the number of homeless people has gone through the roof they do not have. There are now two hundred and thirty-six homeless shelters in

the city. Imagine Yankee Stadium almost four-fifths full of homeless families; about eighteen thousand adults in families in New York City were homeless as of January, 2013, and more than twenty-one thousand children. The C.F.H. says that during Bloomberg's twelve years the number of homeless families went up by seventy-three per cent. One child out of every hundred children in the city is homeless.

The number of homeless single adults is up, too, but more of them are in programs than used to be, and some have taken to living underground, in subway tunnels and other places out of sight. Homeless individuals who do frequent the streets may have a philosophical streak they share with passersby, and of course they sometimes panhandle. Homeless families, by contrast, have fewer problems of mental illness and substance abuse, and they mostly stay off the street. If you are living on the street and you have children, they are more likely to be taken away and put in foster care. When homeless families are on the street or on public transportation, they are usually trying to get somewhere. If you see a young woman with big, wheeled suitcases and several children wearing backpacks on a train bound for some far

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subway stop, they could be homeless. Homeless families usually don't engage with other passengers, and they seldom panhandle.

One Saturday afternoon, I was standing at the corner of Manor and Watson Avenues, in a southeastern part of the Bronx, waiting for a woman named Christina Mateo. I had met her and her then partner on the street the day before. She had said she would show me what a shelter was like—I had never been in one. They were living in a nearby shelter for homeless families. No shelters say "Shelter" on them in big letters. This one looked like an ordinary shabby apartment building, with a narrow entry yard behind a tall black iron grate whose heavy iron door did not lock. People were going in and out. Two young men, one in a hoodie despite the heat and the other in a clean, tight white T-shirt and a black do-rag with the tie ends dangling, leaned into the open windows of cars that pulled up. In between doing that, they looked at me. I am past the age of being a prospect or a threat. I nodded back, genially.

Christina came down the sidewalk pushing a stroller. With her were her nineteen-year-old daughter, her seventeen-year-old son, her fifteen-year-old daughter, and two grandchildren. They had just picked up the younger grandchild from a shelter where she was living with her other grandmother. We all went in, lifting the strollers, and crowded into the small elevator. The security person at the desk asked Christina if I was with her and she said I was. At the door to her fourth-floor apartment, she took out a single key, unattached to any chain, key ring, or other keys, and opened the door.

Uncheerful interior, and an air of many people having recently passed through; the floors were like the insides of old suitcases, with forgotten small things in the corners. Bent window blinds; tragic, drooping, bright-green shower curtain; dark hallway opening onto two bare bedrooms. Christina is forty-one and has pained, empathic dark-brown eyes. She wore blue denim cutoffs, a white blouse, sandals, ivory polish on her fingernails and toenails, and her hair in a bun. Sitting on the only chair in the larger bedroom while I perched on the bed, she told me how she came to be here. She was a home health aide. After the deaths of patients whom she had grown close to—one of them a four-year-old girl with AIDS—she had a breakdown and was given a diagnosis of P.T.S.D. In shelters, out of shelters; for a while she enjoyed her own apartment, with a rent subsidy from a program established by Mayor Bloomberg. The program was cut. She lost the apartment, complicatedly, somehow without being evicted right away, although if she had been, she said, she would have qualified for other, preferable housing.

An accordion file of documents leaned at her ankle. Everybody has documents, but the homeless must keep theirs always close by. She showed me letters with letterheads and foxings and pencil underlinings, and a sheaf of certificates attesting to her success in various programs: Parenting Skills, Anger Management, Women's Group, Basic Relapse Prevention ("I was smoking a lot of marijuana, and this course taught me how to recognize my triggers. Boredom was one of my triggers"), Advanced Relapse Prevention, and My Change Plan. "What I'm waiting for is the paper saying that we have been declared eligible to stay in this shelter. Right now my case is under review. This place is adequate, but it's not hygienic—but I don't want to move. Stability is very important. They will decide if we can stay or not, and then they'll slide the paper under the door." She pointed to the end of the dim hallway as if this paper might appear at any moment, sliding in silently like the checkout bill in a hotel room.

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As it happened, the news Christina was expecting arrived late that same night, in the form of a shelter employee who knocked on the door and presented the paper by hand. It said that she had been declared ineligible for shelter and would have to go to the PATH center before eight-thirty the next morning to reapply.

Some of the things people have said to me outside the PATH center:

“I came here first when I was eighteen, when foster care maxed me out. I been in the system for fourteen years, and I don’t know how many times I’ve had to come back here. When you go to PATH, they always want to deny you. They don’t believe you really homeless.”

“You know what is the best shelter? Covenant House. But it’s for homeless kids, and only has about two hundred beds. There they max you out at twenty-one.”

“This new place, PATH, is better than what used to be here, the E.A.U.”—the Emergency Assistance Unit. “The E.A.U. was horrible.”

“Here they treat you more horrible than a drunk bum.”

“The food here is not too bad, the bag lunches they give you. The baby likes the animal crackers.”

“Hey, yo, you a writer—do you know Denis Hamill?”

“We left PATH at twelve-twenty-six last night and they bused us to a shelter in Queens and we had about three hours of sleep and then they brought us back here at seven this morning to be reassigned, and my kids was falling asleep in the chairs, and a security guard hit the chairs with his radio and made them jump out they sleep, and I told him not to do that because they tired, and he yelled at me and wrote me up, and I filed an incident report, and I’m sure it ended up in the wastebasket.”

“They spend *so much money* on us. It costs three thousand dollars a month to put one family in a shelter! Why don’t they just *give* us part of that money so we can afford our own place to live?”

To get to the PATH center, you take the No. 4 train to Grand Concourse–149th Street, in the Bronx, walk two blocks to 151st Street, make a left, and continue for a block downhill, to 151 East 151st. Of all the places in the city’s shelter system (aside from the Department of Homeless Services offices on Beaver Street, in downtown Manhattan), the PATH center is probably the most important. PATH stands for Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing. All families seeking shelter start out here. When their numbers increase, PATH fills up. Night and day, year in and year out, weekdays and holidays, city shutdown or hurricane disaster, PATH never closes.

Often, it is a parking lot of strollers, a basic part of life for homeless families: these rolling mini-worlds are the single unchanging point of reference that many homeless kids know. The strollers proceed awkwardly through the security scanners, they queue up in a caravan going back and forth in lines in front of the admission desk, they occupy the middle of the floor of the building’s elevators while standees press themselves against the walls. Plastic bags of

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possessions drape the stroller handles, sippy cups of juice fill the cup-holders, Burger King paper crowns ride in the carrying racks beneath. Kids sleep peacefully while consultations and long waits go on around them. Some lean back and watch with a numbed, listless patience that suggests how much of their childhood has already been spent like this. Others hunch and squirm and scream their heads off.

The old Emergency Assistance Unit, which formerly stood on this site, is remembered fondly by nobody. Staffers, city officials, advocates for the homeless, and clients who had to make their way through it are all glad it's gone. The E.A.U. was a windowless brick building with small, bare, ill-smelling waiting rooms. Hundreds of people, including the very old and infants, routinely spent the night there. In 2002, a sixteen-year-old boy killed himself when he learned that his family had to go back there. Linda Gibbs, now the deputy mayor in charge of Health and Human Services, which includes the Department of Homeless Services, was Mayor Bloomberg's first D.H.S. commissioner. She took the new mayor on a tour of the E.A.U. one Sunday morning in 2002. "He was literally stepping over the sleeping kids all over the floor," she told me.

Bloomberg's eventual response was to tear down the E.A.U. and build the PATH center in its place. Where the E.A.U. was grim, PATH is gleaming and efficient—if not exactly welcoming. The land it sits on is oddly shaped and comes to a wedge point. The building fits the shape, so that its end makes an acute angle like the prow of a ship. Points and angles and big windows that expedite the sunlight from one side of the building through to the other define this place as a tool and not a zone for relaxation. Even the low walls around the building and next to the long, stroller-friendly entrance ramp are sloped, so that they can't be sat on. Inside it's clean and well run, and the social workers I talked to on a D.H.S.-led tour of the place seemed serious and enthusiastic. The Bloomberg administration holds up the PATH center as a rebuke to its critics and as a symbol of its humane yet businesslike approach to homelessness.

The "PA" in PATH's acronym—Preventive Assistance—comes across forcefully in the Bloomberg policy, which tries hard to keep applicants out of the "TH," Temporary Housing. PATH will expend great energies in preventing you from being homeless, if other options can be found. If you have no home in New York but own a cabin in Alaska, PATH may give you a plane ticket to Alaska. To save scarce and valuable resources for those who truly merit them, PATH searches out every possible alternative to city-funded shelter. Usually, its efforts focus on finding relatives with whom the family seeking shelter can stay. Patiently and firmly and with endlessly bureaucratized persistence, it makes walking away and giving yourself up to fate seem the easier solution.

The families lining up at PATH, and the single adult men at their intake point, in the Bellevue Men's Shelter, on East Thirtieth Street, and the single adult women at the women's intake at the help women's shelter, on Williams Avenue, in Brooklyn: from a legal standpoint, these people are not asking for charity. They are exercising a right. Since 1938, the right to shelter has been implicit among the rights guaranteed by the constitution of the State of New York (though court action had to confirm it). No other city or state in America offers this right as solidly and unambiguously as does New York.

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Advocates love the right to shelter. Most mayors hate it. Referring to it on one of his weekly radio shows last March, Mayor Bloomberg urged the city's taxpayers "to call their representatives in Albany and say, 'We ain't gonna do this anymore.'" Had he elaborated, he could have put the blame on literature. New York City has always been a place where reformers have scouted around in poor neighborhoods and written books about what they saw. In "American Notes" (1842), Charles Dickens affectingly described the squalor of the Five Points slum in what became Chinatown. Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant, read Dickens, and later filled his own exposé, "How the Other Half Lives," with heart-wrenching, Dickensian details, backed up by documentary flash photographs, among the first in history. Teddy Roosevelt read Riis, practically hero-worshipped him, and, as Police Commissioner, set about reforming the city's housing. Sometimes poetry does make things happen. If you declare, in a famous poem affixed to the Statue of Liberty, in New York Harbor, "Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me," you might consider that a certain commitment has been made.

Another Riis admirer was Fiorello LaGuardia, by general consensus the greatest mayor the city ever had. He loved "How the Other Half Lives" so much that he put a copy of it in the cornerstone of one of the nation's original low-cost public-housing projects, part of a series he built downtown and in Brooklyn. In 1938, with the Great Depression ongoing and his mayoralty in its fifth year, LaGuardia persuaded the state's voters to pass a constitutional amendment to help those in need. The amendment, Article XVII, reads, in Section 1:

The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by such of its subdivisions, and in such manner and by such means, as the legislature may from time to time determine.

New York City's system of housing homeless people and caring for them, as it has evolved, rests mainly on this passage.

The upset-victory story of the Callahan v. Carey lawsuit, the right to shelter's first landmark case, gladdens advocates' hearts to this day. Demand for manpower in the Second World War absorbed most of the city's unemployed, largely solving the problems that Article XVII had addressed. In the prosperous decades following the war, very few in the city were without a place to live. Homelessness meant a small population of older, mostly white men along a few blocks of the Bowery. In 1964, a team of researchers looking for people spending the night in the city's parks found only one homeless man.

Then, all at once in the mid-seventies, homeless people seemed to be everywhere. Even today, nobody knows for sure why the problem became so bad so fast. Between 1965 and 1977, more than a hundred thousand patients were released from state psychiatric hospitals, and perhaps forty-seven thousand of them ended up in the city. At the same time, hundreds of single-room-occupancy hotels, or S.R.O.s, were shutting down; the S.R.O.s had provided low-income individuals with housing that was a step up from nothing. In 1972, the Supreme Court decriminalized vagrancy. Police became less aggressive about rousting those who were sleeping in public. The number of middle-class people in the city went down, which led to a decrease in the supply of livable and affordable apartments, leaving even fewer available to

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the poor. Whatever the cause, by the late seventies many thousands were “sleeping rough” (as the phrase had it) in the city’s public spaces.

Robert Hayes was a twenty-six-year-old lawyer who worked for the Wall Street firm of Sullivan & Cromwell. Like others who became involved in advocacy for the homeless, he had a Catholic-school background—Archbishop Molloy High School, in Queens, and Georgetown University. After getting his law degree from N.Y.U., he stayed in the neighborhood, and he began to wonder about all the homeless people he saw around his Washington Square apartment. From personal observation and from conversations with his friends Ellen Baxter and Kim Hopper, students at Columbia University who had spent hundreds of hours interviewing homeless people in the city, he concluded that the city and the state were neglecting their legal obligation.

Working pro bono, Hayes filed a class-action lawsuit in state court in October of 1979 on behalf of three homeless men whom he met at a Catholic mission. These men claimed that they had been given nowhere to sleep but the so-called Big Room, a dangerous, unsanitary, and crowded overflow area in what had formerly been a municipal shelter; and that they had sometimes been denied shelter entirely. The lead plaintiff’s name was Robert Callahan. He was a longtime fixture on the Bowery. His opposite number—the Carey in Callahan v. Carey—was Hugh L. Carey, then the governor. Hayes based his case on one word in Article XVII: “shall.” When I talked to Hayes not long ago, he quoted, “‘The aid, care and support of the needy etc. SHALL be provided.’” Then he said, “In our presentation before the judge, we simply argued that ‘shall’ means ‘shall.’”

“I dug around in the N.Y.U. law-library basement and found speeches given by the amendment’s supporters and drafters back in 1938 that showed the intent,” he went on. “These proved that the amendment was supposed to apply in hard times as well as in good. I kept the story simple because I’d never tried a case before and didn’t really know what I was doing. Sometimes the judge had to instruct me in the rules of evidence.” Arguments ended in late October, and the plaintiffs asked for an expedited verdict because winter was coming on. While awaiting the decision, Hayes let Callahan stay at his apartment; with some companions they made a big Thanksgiving dinner. Later, after Callahan moved out, Hayes noticed that his Archbishop Molloy High School class ring was missing.

On December 5, 1979, Justice Andrew Tyler, of the New York State Supreme Court, issued a ruling in favor of the plaintiffs. Finding that the state and the city were not in compliance with state law, he ordered them to provide emergency shelter for homeless men immediately in consideration of the weather. Attorneys for the state and the city were stunned. Plaintiffs had requested seven hundred and fifty beds; the city, caught short, asked that the number be left flexible. Plaintiffs willingly agreed. Hayes knew that city officials had no idea how many homeless men there actually were. Soon, more than a thousand men were seeking shelter every night, and the city had to scramble to keep up. The judge’s ruling was of small use to Robert Callahan, however. He was found dead of alcoholism on a street near the Bowery not long afterward.

The decision that bears his name created the right to shelter, based on state law that had existed for forty-one years. In practical terms, Callahan v. Carey also established the courts as

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the de-facto overseers of the city's shelter system. Dozens of court proceedings having to do with city shelters and their management followed, until details as small as the acceptable distance between beds and the prescribed amount of toilet paper in the bathrooms became the subjects of court orders. A consent decree in 1981 between the state and the city and the plaintiffs agreed on guidelines to manage the requirements of the Callahan decision, but other suits continued, including those which eventually confirmed the right to shelter for women, families, and people with AIDS.

Another result of Callahan was the beginning, in 1981, of the Coalition for the Homeless, founded by Robert Hayes, Kim Hopper, and Ellen Baxter. Relying mostly on private donors for financial support, the C.F.H. disturbed and enraged the mayors of the nation's richest city regularly from then on.

On a recent Saturday, I set out to see how people were doing at some homeless shelters I knew about, and on the streets. First, I took the Lefferts Boulevard A train to the end of the line and walked three or four miles to a shelter called the Saratoga Family Inn. It is on Rockaway Boulevard by J.F.K. Airport, across the highway from one of those long-term parking lots which elevate cars two- and three-deep. The shelter used to be a Best Western motel, and it houses about two hundred and fifty families. Fencing topped with barbed wire surrounds the building on several sides, and large banners advertising a slip-and-fall attorney and an auto-leasing place hang from its windowless six-story front.

Two women were talking by the main entryway. Shirley, the older one, sat on her walker, while the younger, Diana, leaned against the wall. "We are living out in the boom-docks here," Diana said, when I told her I was a reporter. Breakfast had just ended and a smell of syrup lingered in the air. "I been in this shelter three years, and I don't care if I never see pancakes, French toast, or waffles again for the rest of my life," she remarked. "I don't even eat the breakfasts here no more. My stomach is too precious to me. And those artificial eggs—what do you call them—Egg Beaters."

"The food here ain't even real no more," said a woman named Kiki, who was returning with breakfast from a nearby deli. "Hey, y'all, this man is from the newspaper!" she called to some people coming out the door. Kiki had many long braids and an antic manner. People gathered around, and at each new complaint—playground is closed too much, kids have nothing to do, out here the travel is so long you have to get up at five in the morning to get your kids to school, kids see too much when they live in a single room with their parents, kids get sick more here, the eight-dollar-an-hour wage for in-house work will never get you out of here—Kiki whooped in affirmation. "Bloomberg put us in a corner and said fuck us!" she whooped. Pointing at the long-term lot across the highway, she said, "Those are parked cars, and we are parked people!" She let out a wild laugh.

"Every month, I get a paper from Welfare saying how much they just paid for me and my two kids to stay in our one room in this shelter, and I can tell you the exact amount," Diana said. "Three thousand four hundred and forty-four dollars! Every month! Give me nine hundred dollars of that every month and I'll find me and my kids an apartment, I promise you."

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By foot, bus, and subway, I backtracked to Brooklyn, changing at outlying stops. Broadway Junction, near the Queens-Brooklyn border, was jumping like Times Square. In Bedford-Stuyvesant, I got off a C train at Nostrand Avenue and walked a few blocks to the vast old armory building that is now the Bedford-Atlantic men's shelter. People in soup-kitchen lines have told me that this is one of the worst shelters in the city. Sunlight glinted on its acres of gray slate roof, and its crenellated tower stood out against the sky. The guy I met here is Marcus (Country) Springs, originally from Lake City, Florida, who prefers to sleep on the street near the shelter—"Under that pear tree," he told me, pointing to a Callery pear up the street.

"In this shelter they treat you like an inmate," Springs said. "I stay in it only in inclement weather. It is not doing me no good, being in there. In a shelter you get what they call situational depression, but if you remove the person from the situation sometimes the depression goes away. These other guys you see on the corner are like me, hoping to meet someone who can help us. Sometimes contractors or movers come by with day jobs. Families visit and bring food. But the D.H.S.—man, they have forgot us. The last person from this corner that got housed was like two years ago."

Next, I made a stop at the Bellevue Men's Shelter. For gloominess of aspect, Bellevue is unique, with its high columns near the entryway surmounted by the words "Psychiatric Hospital" (the building's original function). Bellevue has eight hundred and fifty beds and is also called one of the worst shelters in the city; in general, the smaller shelters are said to be much less bad, and some are even nice. Ellis, the dollar-apiece Newport cigarette seller on the street out front, suggested I go to Intake and register myself if I wanted to see what the place was like; I took his word for it instead. Then I subways up to 103rd Street on the Lexington line and walked across the footbridge to Wards Island, where a three-hundred-bed men's shelter occupies another former psychiatric hospital. That shelter, called the Charles H. Gay Building, is a lonesome place; constantly you hear the tires bumping on an approach ramp to the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge up above it. I asked a guy sitting on the curb in front of the shelter what he thought of it. He considered for a moment and said, "Jail's worse."

Nearby, a young man named Angel was helping a woman from Access Wireless hand out cell phones that were paid for by Medicaid. He called them "Obama phones," because they were free. A man in the background was being evicted from the shelter, cursing out the D.H.S. police all the way. Angel told me that he had lost his job in a towel and linen warehouse about six weeks ago and that he wanted to get a job more than anything. He was wearing a pair of trousers that appeared to be riding very low, as the style now has it, but actually they were an optical illusion. The boxer shorts at the top of the trousers were a part of the garment itself.

An M-35 bus from Wards Island dropped me off at 125th Street in East Harlem along with a lot of guys from the shelter. Almost none of them paid their fare, but the driver looked the other way. Police had just concluded a sweep of makeshift dwellings under the Metro-North bridge at 125th and in front of a clothing store on Lexington between 125th and 124th. Cardboard lay scattered here and there and some ring-billed gulls were picking up French fries. A young policeman whose name tag said "Chan" told me that some of the homeless who congregate here smoke a synthetic marijuana known as K2, which is sold as incense and causes lots of trouble. Just then a bearded guy ran up shouting, "Arrest that bitch!" He pointed

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at a woman. The cop asked what he should arrest the woman for and the guy said, "She just worked some voodoo on Maria's cart!"

As darkness fell, I took a bus downtown and looked for a man named Rick, who has slept on or near the steps of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, at Fifty-fifth and Fifth, intermittently since the Giuliani administration. Rick has told me that he prefers the streets to any shelter. Throngs of people were passing in the rush of a midtown Saturday evening, but Rick was not around. In the Village, I found a few small homeless encampments under construction hoardings, but the only person I recognized was a guy who used to attend a writers' workshop I taught a few years ago at a soup kitchen in Chelsea. The guy had been a problem because he would come to class and then just stand there and look at people. Tonight he was among all his stuff and reading a very small book held close to his face in the dim light. I tried to get his attention but failed.

In the warm Saturday-night air the city was hivelike, humming, fabulously lit, and rocking with low, thrilling, Daisy Buchanan-like laughter. A young couple slept under a blanket beneath the hoardings at the Twenty-fifth Street Armory; the boy still had his baseball cap on. Meanwhile, attendees at a gala going on inside the armory took breaks on the sidewalk just around the corner and smoked and made phone calls. I ducked into the subway and rode a crowded No. 4 train uptown and went back to the PATH center. I had never seen it after dark. Up here, the night was quieter, and the building with its pointed end and five brightly illuminated floors rose up like an ocean liner, or the yet unsunk front of one.

Two school buses and a black van waited by the building's sidewalk-level door. A PATH employee in a blue T-shirt swept up under the street lights and by the curb, and a guy wearing a fringed scarf wandered around muttering. The vehicles started up and began to idle and a narrative of nighttime journeys seemed to take hold. For a while nobody came from the PATH building's door. Then a few families emerged with strollers and suitcases. Sleepy kids held pillows and stuffed animals. A tall woman with a shorter man and a teen-age girl came to the van, and the tall woman asked me if I was the driver. The actual driver came up and opened the van's back doors and began to stow the family's stuff, quietly and taking care with it.

The van's interior light shone on him. A young mother with a baby in one arm had some trouble folding up her stroller and the driver helped her fold it and then he put it in the back. "We've been here at PATH since ten-thirty this morning," the tall woman told me. "Twelve and a half hours. Now we'll go to a shelter for ten days while they decide if we're eligible. I don't know how this all happened. We were staying with my sister. Now we're wondering what this shelter we're going to will be like. A year ago we had to stay in a shelter for a week and it was kind of bad."

More families came out, accompanied by a woman with a clipboard. People got sorted out into the right vehicles. Kids slept on people's shoulders, except for a toddler named Jared, who was stagger-walking to and fro. He bumped against the legs of the man who was sweeping and a woman watching him picked him up and said to the sweeper, "Sorry—my bad." Soon all the passengers were aboard, the vehicles' doors closed, and the red tail-lights came on. Slowly the buses drove off, followed by the van. Nighttime departures and arrivals occupy the subbasement of childhood memory. The guy sweeping and the muttering man and the woman

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with the clipboard and the reporter taking notes existed in a strange, half-unreal state of being part of someone else's deepest memories a lifetime from now. An orange had fallen from a bag lunch and lay beside the curb. The muttering man picked it up and looked at it and rubbed it and put it in his pocket.

Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs, the Bloomberg administration official most significantly involved in its policies for the homeless, is a trim, gray-haired woman in her mid-fifties whose father was the mayor of Menands, a village north of Albany. She grew up there and came to New York City right after getting her degree at SUNY Buffalo Law School. Intricate questions of public policy that would confuse and baffle most people intrigue her. Her blue eyes often have an expression that can only be described as a twinkle. I've seen this look in other Bloomberg staffers' eyes, and in photos of the Mayor himself. It reminds me of the twinkle in the eyes of the Santa Claus in the Coca-Cola ads from the nineteen-fifties (inappropriately, given the Mayor's feelings about soft drinks).

I think the contagious Bloomberg twinkle comes partly from the Mayor's role as a sort of Santa figure. He works for the city for a dollar a year, he gives away his money by the hundreds of millions, and he manifestly has the city's happiness and well-being at heart. Every rich person should be like him. His deputies and staffers twinkle with the pleasure of participating in his general beneficence, as well they should. "You can't make a man mad by giving him money"—this rule would seem to be absolute. And yet sometimes people in the city he has done so much for still get mad at Bloomberg and criticize him. At the wrong of this, the proper order of things is undone, and the Bloomberg twinkle turns to ice.

Mary Brosnahan, the president of the Coalition for the Homeless, has worked for that organization for twenty-five years. She grew up in Dearborn, Michigan, and got her undergraduate degree at Notre Dame. Dark-haired and soft-spoken, she seems to enjoy the complications of public policy as much as Gibbs does. Patrick Markee, the C.F.H.'s senior policy analyst, is a graduate of St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, and of Harvard. He has a high forehead, a short ginger-and-gray beard (sometimes), and a voice that jumps into its upper registers when he is outraged. That two such earnest, unassuming people can get our multibillionaire mayor so upset seems a remarkable thing. Gibbs generally refers to them and to others in advocacy groups as "the litigants." The term applies, because the C.F.H. and others have been bringing suits against the city, with the help of the Legal Aid Society, in an ongoing sequence ever since Callahan. She pronounces the word "litigants" with an air of careful neutrality that is somehow frightening.

One afternoon, I sat in the offices of the C.F.H. on Fulton Street, downtown, while Markee and Brosnahan told me of the many things the Bloomberg administration had done wrong. On another afternoon, in a small conference room at City Hall, not far away, I met with Gibbs and two of her colleagues while they told me of the things it had done right.

"People have no idea what a mess the Department of Homeless Services was when we came on board," Gibbs said. "The litigants probably never saw the confused mass of court orders and directives that had piled up at D.H.S. in folders *this thick*, not even catalogued in any usable way, as a result of all their lawsuits. And that mass of court orders was what the D.H.S. had to constantly refer to in running the shelter system! Finally, in 2008, we were able to

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bring some clarity and structure to that. This gave demoralized D.H.S. staffers hope, and a new sense of empowerment.”

Markee: “The agreement worked out with the D.H.S. in 2008 to resolve all the preceding court orders with regard to shelter management was obviously a good outcome for the homeless and for the city. But the C.F.H. and other advocates accomplished it only in the face of constant opposition from Linda Gibbs and the city’s lawyers.”

Gibbs: “The 2008 agreement we finally reached with the litigants vacating all preceding court orders and replacing them with a coherent, mutually acceptable framework for running the shelters is an achievement we’re very proud of. But the litigants fought us on it every step of the way.”

Brosnahan: “The most amazing mistake the Bloomberg people made was that they were supposed to be this results-oriented, data-driven team, and they paid no attention to their own data! From the beginning, they ignored decades’ worth of experience showing that homeless people who receive permanent housing with rent subsidies almost never go back to being homeless.”

Markee: “So, ignoring all that data, Bloomberg ended homeless people’s priority for subsidized public housing, and for Section 8, a federal subsidy that pays the difference between thirty per cent of a renter’s income and the market rent of his apartment. Section 8 is permanent once you’ve been approved for it, and studies show that nearly ninety per cent of the people who get it are still in their own apartments five years later. A certain number of homeless people annually had been given priority over other applicants to receive Section 8. The policy had worked forever, and they ended it.”

Gibbs: “We discontinued Section 8 priority because of its dwindling availability, and because we discovered that the chance of getting Section 8 was operating as a perverse incentive, drawing people to seek shelter who otherwise would not have done so.”

Markee: “The theory of the ‘perverse incentive’ has been disproved over and over again. Most people who become homeless do not get themselves in that predicament in order to receive a rent subsidy. If a small number actually do take that unlikely route, the net effect on the shelter system is greatly outweighed by all those who leave homelessness permanently after getting a subsidy.”

Gibbs: “We did not end Section 8 priority with nothing to replace it. In fact, we came up with a far superior subsidy plan, called Advantage, to be funded by the city and state, which was particularly targeted to homeless families and individuals. The litigants say they want rent subsidies, but they were opposed to Advantage from the beginning.”

Brosnahan: “Actually, we were glad when we heard that the Bloomberg administration wanted to start a new rent-subsidy program. But when they announced, almost immediately, that the subsidies would have a short time limit we flipped out. Short-term subsidies obviously were not going to be enough to keep people from again becoming homeless.”

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The Advantage program went into effect in the spring of 2007. It was incremental, paying all but fifty dollars of the rent to start; then, like Section 8, it paid the difference between an apartment's market rent and thirty per cent of the renter's income. When asked about the program by the *News*, Markee predicted that it would be "a revolving door back into shelter." Within the next year and a half, some nineteen thousand people, including individuals and those in families, signed up for Advantage. Soon, they had moved from shelters into their own apartments and were paying rent.

In 2008, Rob Hess, the D.H.S. commissioner, announced that no Advantage recipients had gone back to being homeless, and he quoted Markee's earlier prediction derisively, without mentioning him by name. But in 2011 the state, facing a budget shortfall, withdrew its funding for Advantage; and the city, unable to afford it without the state, ended the program. As the loss of the subsidy took hold, thousands of newly installed renters couldn't pay their rent, and many of them eventually returned to the shelter system.

The collapse of Advantage contributed greatly to the rise in homeless numbers during Bloomberg's third term. Most of the heads of households in shelters whom I've met, like Christina Mateo, say that they became homeless because they lost Advantage subsidies. Some say that getting their own apartments only to lose them again was worse than not getting them in the first place.

Bloomberg and his administration had set out to do something about homelessness. At the time he took office, he feared that New Yorkers had come to accept homelessness as a condition of city life, and the possibility alarmed him. He said, "We are too strong, and too smart, and too compassionate a city to surrender to the scourge of homelessness. We won't do it. We won't allow it." He assembled advisory groups by the score, called meetings, took recommendations. A blueprint emerged, entitled "Uniting for Solutions Beyond Shelter: The Action Plan for New York City." The administration's businesslike, can-do ethic infused the effort, providing goals and charts and tables, and deadlines by which this or that would be accomplished. The Mayor said that in five years he planned to reduce homelessness by two-thirds.

In this instance, he probably would have been better off if he had left office after his second term. His new homeless policy seemed to work for a while; by the middle years of his mayoralty, homeless numbers had levelled off. But by his third term the homeless population was climbing every year, exacerbated by the '08 market crash, and continuing upward even after the crash's effects on the city had begun to abate.

Faced with questions about these numbers—evidence of what was shaping up as the worst failure of his administration—the Mayor grew peevisish. He blamed "the advocates" for Advantage's failure, saying that they had lobbied to end the Advantage program (they supported ending it only because they wanted to replace it with something better, they countered). He reported that the New York City shelter system was being inundated by people from out of town, and, on one of his radio shows, he gave a skewed example of the city's long-standing legal obligation, claiming, "You can arrive in your private jet at Kennedy Airport, take a private limousine and go straight to the shelter system and walk in the door and we've got to give you shelter." He didn't mention that the D.H.S.'s stated determination to keep

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applicants out of city shelters whenever possible would have sent this hypothetical traveller back to her airplane forthwith, perhaps with a one-time subsidy for jet fuel.

Criticisms passed on to the Mayor from the C.F.H. seemed to make him especially touchy. On one occasion, he referred to the C.F.H. as “not a reputable organization.”

The difference in philosophy is fundamental, and it goes way back. In the years after the Civil War, a Massachusetts woman named Josephine Shaw Lowell wanted to improve the living situation of the thousands of postwar “vagabonds” then at large in New York City. Her husband, Charles Russell Lowell, had died in the war, as had her brother, Robert Gould Shaw, the famous commander of an all-black regiment. In her good works among the vagabonds, the young, high-minded New England widow considered charity to be corrupting. Soup kitchens enraged her. Rather than give handouts, she preferred to teach the indigent “the joy of working.” Despite or because of her ardor, she proved a bad fit for the charitable organization where she served as the director, and she resigned.

That is one philosophy. To some degree, though perhaps not as much as Mrs. Lowell, the Bloomberg administration has subscribed to it. The Mayor’s plan to reduce homelessness has always stressed “client responsibility.” In an interview in 2003, Linda Gibbs talked about the new outlook at the D.H.S. She said that a lack of standards had helped to create “passivity” among shelter users, and that the new goal was to “manage this in a way that people change their behavior.” For the services homeless people were being given, conscientiousness and diligence were asked of them in return. To begin with, they had to look for jobs and apartments, attend regular meetings with social workers, and obey all shelter rules. Their homelessness was mostly their fault, and so their behavior had to change.

Then, there’s the other philosophy, which says that it’s not their fault. What the homeless need, this other philosophy says, is a stable place to live, not a system telling them what to do. Once stable housing is achieved, changes in behavior, if necessary, can follow. The problem is not the poor’s lack of character but a lack of places in the city where they can afford to live and of jobs that pay a decent wage. The problem is not inside but outside. No change in personal behavior is going to make rents cheaper. According to this philosophy, the PATH center’s relentless search for relatives with whom applicants for shelter can double up or triple up just crams more bodies into the too short supply of moderate- and low-income housing in the city, and sends people into unhealthy or even dangerous situations.

Manhattan is now America’s most expensive urban area to live in, and Brooklyn is the second most expensive. Meanwhile, more than one in five New York City residents live below the poverty line. Nearly one in five experiences times of “food insecurity” in the course of a year—i.e., sometimes does not have enough safe and nutritious food to eat. One-fifth of 8.3 million New Yorkers equals 1.66 million New Yorkers. For people at the lower-middle and at the bottom, incomes have gone down. The median household income in the Bronx is about thirty-three thousand dollars a year; Brooklyn’s is about forty-four thousand. Meanwhile, rents go steadily up. A person working at a minimum-wage job would need 3.1 such jobs to pay the median rent for an apartment in the city without spending more than thirty per cent of her income. If you multiply 3.1 by eight hours a day by five days a week, you get a hundred and twenty-four hours; a week only has a hundred and sixty-eight hours.

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The number of market-rate rental apartments available to those of low income is extremely small. A metaphor one often hears about the homeless is that of the musical chairs: with such a small number of low-income-affordable apartments, the players who are less able to compete, for whatever reason, don't get the chairs when the music stops. Every year, more and more chairs are taken away. The existence of so many people who are homeless indicates that a very large number of renters are close to that condition. Housing advocates in the Bronx report that some of the people they try to help are paying seventy per cent of their income in rent and that others are living doubled up and tripled up and in unimproved basements and in furnace rooms—conditions that recall the days of Jacob Riis.

Patrick Markee has said that any real attempt to take on these problems will involve the restoration of Section 8 and public-housing priority, creating a new rent-subsidy program, passing living-wage laws, and building more low-income and rent-supported housing. Given the un-success of Bloomberg's homelessness policies, and the comparative authority the C.F.H. has gained thereby, its suggestions are likely to be more listened to. Joe Lhota, the Republican mayoral candidate, wants to amend Article XVII so that it limits the right to shelter to New York residents only; according to D.H.S. statistics, twenty-three per cent of shelter residents listed their previous dwelling as an out-of-state address.

Bill de Blasio, the probable next mayor, wants to ease the D.H.S. restrictions determining who qualifies for shelter, set aside public-housing vacancies for the homeless, come up with a new rent-subsidy plan involving a voucher system by which rent-challenged tenants can afford their own apartments, and build a hundred thousand new units of low-income housing. Campaign contributions he has received from slum landlords who profit from running crummy shelters worry some observers, and should; the condition of the homeless can always get worse, while the financial reward for housing them can be enormous. De Blasio and his defenders say that he has always stood up to slumlords and wants to get rid of the expensive shelter housing they provide. In any event, the near future will likely bring a major revision of Bloomberg policies, and another shakeup of the world of the homeless will occur.

Over time, I lost touch with almost all the homeless people I talked to. There was Richard, a quiet, humorous man with disabilities I met at a soup kitchen. He had been in the care of friends until they took him to a subway station one day and left him there. He spoke of the friends without resentment, as if by accepting homelessness he had finally been able to do them a favor in return. Richard has not been seen at the soup kitchen for a while.

A young man named Jay was carrying a rabbit outside the PATH center when I met him one day last spring. He made a call on my cell phone because he thought I might take the rabbit off his hands (most shelters don't allow pets). The rabbit's name was Queen. A family member of Jay's was about to show up with Queen's cage and food when I finally declined. Jay and I talked on the phone a few times after that—the family member's cell phone had my number. He and his mother and brothers were in a shelter in Brooklyn and the rabbit was with a cousin. Later, Jay's or his relative's cell-phone number stopped working.

Michael, who was sitting by the road to the Charles H. Gay Building, told me he had lost his job when the dock where he worked was destroyed by Sandy. He said, "Bloomberg thinks we low-down, but we ain't—we just poor." In twenty-eight per cent of the families in shelters, at least

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one person has a job. Erica, who lived in a shelter despite working for an energy company in Connecticut, listed her rage-filled complaints in a burst like a ratchet gun, with swift, dramatic gestures. Her shelter apartment, which she showed me, was spotless. Paul, an older West Indian man, waited in line at a C.F.H. food-distribution van by Battery Park while we talked. He said he had been laid off from his job as a furniture handler and shipper in Staten Island and was sleeping on the couches of friends. Shenon, a home health aide who lived in a family shelter on Junius Street, in Brooklyn, said that “grown-ass men” walked its hallways nearly naked in front of her kids. She offered to show me the shelter, and told me a cell-phone number, but, like most of the others I was given, it turned out not to work.

Soon after Christina Mateo received notice of her ineligibility for shelter, she called me in a frantic state. She was on her way to PATH to reapply. When I called her two days later, she sounded calm. It had all been a mixup; she was back in the same shelter. Two days after that, we spoke again. A new problem with her eligibility had come up, and she was going back to PATH. I tried to find out what happened but wasn't able to reach her again.

Homelessness is a kind of internal exile that distributes people among the two hundred and thirty-six shelters around the city and keeps them moving. In this restlessness, the homeless remind me of the ghostly streaks on photos of the city from long ago, where the camera's slow shutter speed could capture only a person's blurry passing. Of all the homeless people who gave me their cell-phone numbers, only two—Marcus (Country) Springs and a woman I talked to briefly named Rebeca Gonzzales—could still be reached after a few weeks had passed. That their cell phones continued to work made them also photographable, and Springs's portrait accompanies this article.

Robert Hayes, the young attorney who brought and won *Callahan v. Carey* and co-founded the Coalition for the Homeless, remained involved in homeless advocacy. He won other important class-action suits, kept up with the city's management of the shelter system, and continued to clash with the powers in city government. At times, the work overwhelmed him with its pressures and strident controversies. He thought the future of the city depended on him, he felt the weight of the suffering poor on his shoulders. When it became too much, he would get in his car and drive to Maine and not stop until he was in some uncrowded, remote place, and then after a short while he would drive back.

During the administration of Mayor Edward Koch, the city found itself more than usually strapped for places to house the homeless. Koch was among the mayors who hated the right to shelter and the onus it imposed on the city, and he and Hayes had many exchanges that ranged from bitter to nasty. Low-income and middle-income housing also was in short supply under Koch, and as these problems intensified his administration adopted a plan of setting aside buildings that had been seized in tax default and rehabilitating them for housing. These buildings are called *in rem* buildings, from the name of the legal action that transfers ownership to the city. By fixing up *in rem* buildings, Koch began a process that eventually provided a hundred and fifty thousand new units of affordable housing, much of it subsidized for low-income tenants. Of those units, ten per cent, or fifteen thousand units, were set aside for the homeless.

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Colorful and witty as Koch was, the success of his *in rem* housing added gravitas to his reputation. When he died, last February, the fact that his *in rem* program had provided housing for many tens of thousands of poor and middle-income people ran at the top of his obituaries.

As for Robert Hayes, after ten years with the C.F.H. his trips to Maine became longer, and his weariness at his job greater, until finally he decided to quit. He did a stint with the prestigious Manhattan firm of O'Melveny & Myers, and then moved with his wife to just north of Portland and set himself up in private practice. They had three daughters. In Maine, he represented Exxon as well as local people fighting paper mills, and he became less "us versus them" in outlook, partly because the legal community was so small that the people he went up against in court were the same ones he ran into at the supermarket. After nine years, he moved back, to Hartsdale, New York, where he is now a senior vice-president at a company that provides health benefits for people covered by Medicare and Medicaid.

In 2003, he happened to cross paths briefly with former Mayor Koch in a TV studio. Afterward, Hayes decided to give his old adversary a call. His experience in Maine had led him to think about his battles of the past, and he wanted to make peace with Koch if peace needed to be made. Koch accepted the invitation and the two went out to lunch.

Hayes, a self-possessed, slim, sandy-haired man of sixty, looks like what he is—someone who has seen a lot, won some big games, and now levelly watches the world. "We met in the Bryant Park Grill, behind the library," Hayes told me recently, at his White Plains office. "The place was full, and everybody recognized Koch, and he was pleased by the attention. We talked—or he did, ninety-five per cent about himself, of course, although I was happy to listen. After a while, the subject moved to our old disputes over homeless issues and the right to shelter. Koch said that if it hadn't been for the pressure from us advocates to do something about housing for the homeless he might not have been forced to undertake his *in rem* program. Now he was an old man, and he knew that the *in rem* housing was going to be his legacy.

"He told me he knew that, and then he did a very un-Kochlike thing," Hayes said. "He thanked me." ♦