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OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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December 2, 2024

**Comments to the New York City Department of Homeless Services
Re: Public Hearing on Proposed Rules regarding notice of shelter siting
Gale A. Brewer, City Council, 6th District**

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the City Council Member for District 6, representing most of the Upper West Side, part of Clinton and all of Central Park in Manhattan.

New York is facing a housing crisis of historic proportions, with affordable housing at an all-time low and rents skyrocketing. Addressing this crisis demands thoughtful, comprehensive solutions that prioritize not only the needs of people experiencing homelessness but also the well-being of the communities where the shelters are placed. Selecting shelter sites that consider safety, public health, and the quality of life for all residents is critical.

The proposed changes aim to improve transparency by requiring public information sessions and notifications to elected officials, keeping communities better informed about potential shelter locations. Increased transparency and meaningful public engagement is not a hindrance to the timely operation of temporary shelters – even in a ‘state of emergency’. While I believe the proposed changes are a step in the right direction, I am concerned that public information sessions fall short.

Unlike public hearings, which allow for real-time dialogue, questions and debate, information sessions often lack the level of engagement that public hearings provide, where real-time dialogue occurs. Information sessions tend to be one-way communications, where community members can only ask limited questions or voice concerns, without much room for conversation (or even answers to their questions).

Here are my proposed recommendations for improving the process:

- DHS should reconsider the format and structure of these public information sessions to make them more interactive and engaging. Providers should be required to participate alongside the agency. We need a more robust platform for public discussion, with opportunities for dialogue.
- DHS must go beyond simply announcing the date, time and locations of these sessions. They must be accessible to all residents, including those with limited English proficiency.
- Sessions should occur at various times to accommodate the schedules of working families.

- The community deserves ongoing updates throughout the shelter development process, beyond the initial notification of a shelter's proposed location. Regular updates on shelter status and integration into broader city support services are critical for building trust and ensuring long-term community engagement.
- While I appreciate the requirements for notifying elected officials and community boards of a potential shelter site, the public would benefit from a clearer understanding of how siting decisions are made including how DHS works with other city agencies to coordinate services for both shelter residents and the surrounding neighborhoods.
- Lastly, I am concerned about the exemption of temporary or emergency shelters from some of these requirements. While I understand this urgency, to members of the public, it can seem like New York City has been struggling against a decades-long 'state of emergency' often used to circumvent transparency. For example, Emergency Executive Order 224, issued by Mayor Adams in October 2022, has been extended many times –just as recently as November 29, 2024 in the form of Emergency Executive Order 701. I urge the department to ensure a basic level of community engagement, even in crisis or official 'state of emergency' situations. If emergency shelters are extended beyond the duration of a declared emergency, the same transparency measures should apply.

I believe the proposed rule changes are an important step toward increasing transparency and public involvement in the shelter siting process. However, I also believe that we must ensure that these rules are implemented with a focus on inclusivity, accessibility and the long-term needs of both the communities impacted by shelters and the New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.

Having experienced the opening of many shelters all over Manhattan for the past 25 years, and even before that, what works is honest dialogue, a non-profit operator from the community with a good track record, and a commitment to continued discussions, not just at a Community Advisory Board, but all the time, and keeping the inside and outside the building safe and clean, even spruced up to show community-building.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.