

Friday May 8th 2020

Dear DHS and Administrator Carter,

We received your April 16th letter to us which addressed our initial concerns about how DHS is handling Covid-19 within the shelter system. We have been disappointed with DHS's response overall during this pandemic and the lack of support for TGNC people. Our response is a bit lengthy and we hope that you take the time to read every single word as it will demonstrate why we are so disappointed and why we feel that DHS should be accountable for what is occurring; our people have been left struggling alone. We are asking for specific immediate changes for which we are certain will help our community.

FOOD: There is a lack of food resources and access within the shelter system. We learned from countless clients across the DHS single adult and family shelter system who have been surviving off their own and other organizations resources. Many have not been able to obtain food and therefore they are going hungry many for days on end. Clients have reported many issues during the pandemic including:

1. The shelter may not provide food at all forcing clients who are mobile to go outside and use public transportation which puts them at further risk to obtain food.
2. Shelters are not providing metrocards and with many pantries closed it forces clients to travel, not every neighborhood has a food pantry and many pantries only open certain days and hours.
3. People who receive city meals are limited by options, especially people with dietary restrictions.
4. Shelters create barriers for people obtaining food delivery or receiving direct food from outside mutual aid, donations, and other sources.
5. The shelter hands out food without proper distribution which creates hoarding and lack of food.
6. Snacks and food that are supposed to be distributed to clients aren't, people are going hungry.
7. There is a lack of access to safe drinking water in at least one shelter we found.
8. Clients with disabilities are not being supported by staff to obtain food.

Changes we are asking for:

1. Proper meals distribution with supervision so that no one is left without food.
2. An immediate assurance that ALL shelters are providing snacks and food as required.
3. Shelters MUST provide food for those with dietary restrictions i.e. vegan or gluten free. This is especially important for clients with medical conditions, this is a part of disability justice.
4. Team up with restaurants, pantries and other food sources to distribute food to clients.
5. Provide metrocards in order for people to travel to pantries, if need be.
6. Make safe (bottled if necessary) drinking water to shelter residents.
7. Provide increased food assistance to those with disabilities including wellness checks.

Stories from our members on the challenges they experienced: One client reported that her shelter's water fountain had brown water and when she asked for bottled water from the staff to take medicine she was denied. This same client reported being denied snacks and dinner one night at her shelter and having to save bottles of water to trade for food in the shelter. Another community member shared food was put out at 5 pm but the workers did not supervise it and people began grabbing food and hoarding it. One client who is vegan was told they couldn't be accommodated and had to go hungry for days, DHS provided them pears, a bag of bread, and peanut butter. Overall clients report a lack of access

to food with an alarming trend that people were left without food especially people with disabilities and those with food accommodation needs.

SANTIZER: Your letter stated previously that there were shortages of hand sanitizer and hand soap throughout the country which impacted DHS, and therefore you are unable to provide these resources. We understand that there is a lack of hand sanitizer but we cannot at all understand the lack of hand soap as there are many companies selling these products. We are linking to some of those companies below. We understand that shipment may be delayed at times, but we don't understand why DHS is refusing to purchase these products. Furthermore, many grocery stores, supermarkets and local stores are selling soap and cleaning products. Our community members should have equal access to these items especially if they are at greater risk in a congregate setting shelter. To not have cleaning and hygiene products is simply inexcusable, it offended our members and angered us putting many of our folks at risk when this product is readily available. Currently clients have shared that:

1. Shelters are not being cleaned any more than they were before the pandemic.
2. Many reported conditions unaddressed including heaters and standing water in a shower.
3. There is a shortage of staff and the staff on site are less engaged and not actively cleaning.
4. Clients reported the sanitizer or soap dispensers in their bathrooms are empty or broken.
5. No paper towels to dry hands, one client shared being given 1 roll of toilet paper for the month and having to buy their own and share with other shelter residents.
6. Clients reported not being able to access laundry, and not given any money or supports to do so.

Changes we are asking for:

1. The shelters should provide basic cleaning and hygiene products to all clients (soap, paper towels, toilet paper, laundry detergent, etc)
2. Shelters should purchase cleaning and hygiene products and provide additional cleaning.

Links to soap:

1. https://www.zoro.com/earth-friendly-products-hand-dishwashing-soap-5-galunscented-pl972105/i/G0463933/feature-product?clid=CjwKCAjw4871BRAjEiwAbxXi2zCwloo5OkYegLQK7rohQV4tWak2oVNSuNr46y4ai-kP_lfrmEzLLhoCUHoQAvD_BwE
2. https://packagefreeshop.com/products/bulk-castile-soap-saponified?variant=32004088660065&gclid=CjwKCAjw4871BRAjEiwAbxXi28WiockA1NL6OPNknzLDr1Zn12rhOjkbQEnJI0erehxKS2XmSOr5NxoCAmsQAvD_BwE
3. https://www.instacart.com/landing?product_id=18475257&retailer_id=26®ion_id=425394846&mrid=309554173

MASKS: Clients face a fine for walking the streets without a mask. DHS did not provide masks for clients in a timely fashion, how can we ensure that our communities have not been policed/fined for something the shelter should have provided? Our TGNC communities were already at high risk of police violence/brutality; this issue only exacerbates the problem.

1. Residents are just now receiving masks to keep themselves safe after staff had gotten them.

Changes we are asking for:

1. Shelters to provide masks, gloves, and any necessary items that the city and state makes mandatory to wear in order to move around the community

NUMBERS OF PEOPLE IMPACTED IN SHELTER: According to the research members of our team have done on nyc.gov (<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data.page>) data collected on Covid-19,

there are 173,288 cases in NYC reported on May 6th 2020. Out of those numbers 43,676 people were hospitalized and 5,359 people died. Out of 12,000 you reported in our last exchange only 10 people needed to be hospitalized. The numbers don't add up to us, according to nyc.gov, you might have roughly 3,024 people hospitalized to date out of 12,000 people. At an earlier date, you should have had at least 1,000 people hospitalized out of 12,000, minimum 700 people hospitalized out of 12,000 people at the time of your letter. The reported death of homeless people is 23 and we are concerned this doesn't add up with the overall data collected thus far. Furthermore, we know that folks in the shelter systems are not receiving covid-19 tests despite being very vulnerable in congregate settings. One client reported:

1. Her shelter floor was converted to quarantine putting her at risk when she was not sick.

Changes we are asking for:

1. Properly report the number of people in DHS infected, hospitalized and who die from covid-19.
2. Shelters provide tests or access to facilities where people can get tested for free.
3. Outreach programs serve street homeless people properly (i.e. on trains) without police force.

Hotels and Safe Space for TGNC People: The current issues highlight why we need safe housing and not shelters. Housing could have helped ensure that people received food from organizations, were provided safe sheltering, and had a place to keep up with some level of hygiene without being housed in a congregate setting. We have advocated for safe sustainable housing prior Covid-19 and we strongly encourage DHS to move forward with suggested ideas to support TGNC people is safe housing as:

1. Several members have reported sleeping in abandoned buildings or the streets because of shelter conditions or being denied shelter or harassed in the process for being TGNC.
2. Several members reported being denied the option of a hotel even if they were at risk.
3. Violence has increased in the shelters overall with a lack of staff intervention or support.
4. Our ask TGNC folks be moved to hotels due to violence and discrimination met without answer.

Changes we are asking for:

1. Shelters provide a safe space for TGNC clients, even if that means hotel spaces.
2. DHS make an increased effort to prevent violence, discrimination and abuse.

Stories from our members on the challenges they experienced: One member saw someone get their ribs broken in their shelter before they were finally able to get a transfer to a hotel after begging. Once at the hotel they experienced harassment based on their gender identity, staff refused to acknowledge their name and pronouns despite being asked multiple times. One of our members felt so unsafe going into shelter she preferred to stay on the street in an abandoned building after she was misgendered at a DHS women's shelter. A member was spat on by another shelter client for being trans and she had to file a police report, in that same shelter a different member reported increased harassment from clients and staff including name calling which was causing her mental health to further spiral.

ECONOMIC SUPPORTS: What is anything is DHS doing to support the economic needs of people in shelter? TGNC people face high rates of unemployment and discrimination in job seeking. Across the city mutual aid organizing and non-profit organizations like SRLP have been supporting people in shelter yet

DHS has received additional COVID19 funding. What has that money been allocated to? How have clients directly benefited from the funding? Clients raised concerns such as:

1. no address to obtain their stimulus check and no support from staff to figure it out.
2. case managers not helping them find housing if they have a voucher, providing them with housing vouchers, or helping them seek apartments due to Covid-19.
3. The shelters don't provide wifi in order to work remotely or contact family, friends, or support.

Changes we are asking for:

1. Provide ways homeless people can receive their stimulus check and prevent it from getting lost.
2. Provide WIFI and housing vouchers, apartment search support, and help finding stable housing.

Stories from our members on the challenges they experienced: One member shared she usually has to go to Starbucks for free WIFI since they are closed due to COVID she walks over a mile to the Staten Island Ferry has to pretend to use the bathroom 'miss the ferry' and use the WIFI, and she gets kicked out and harassed by staff or people there. For people in shelters who work and can work or could remotely, why would the shelter not provide WIFI so they have access to economic opportunities?

Healthcare Access- There are people in shelters who cannot access their hormone shots since the shelter environment is not sterile or obtain needles. Many people cannot access virtual support space or in person counseling and there is a lack of supportive services for DHS clients, especially TGNC clients who face a lack of culturally competent case managers and DHS staff. On top of all of this many TGNC people in NYC have had their medically necessary surgeries and procedures delayed causing extreme distress and anxiety with no proper on site support. What support has been made possible for clients?

Changes we are asking for:

1. People to be moved out of the shelters to hotels so that they can access their healthcare needs
2. Provide mental health care/access
3. At minimum, telehealth services, both physical and mental health, are provided especially for TGNC folks who have a higher rate of suicidality as well as resource lines provided.
4. As part of telehealth, we urge DHS to provide WIFI to residents so that they can stay connected with family, friends, healthcare providers, legal councils, and other needed providers.

We ask that you revisit your Covid-19 policies and provide immediate and long term housing for all, with a priority to TGNC people. During this pandemic DHS is providing hotel rooms, our community has faced violence and brutality (even death) at a rapid rate over the years due to transphobia, we have asked you to provide safe shelter to our community without being afforded this option. We ask that you keep in mind as you move forward that our members can be housed safely if DHS chooses to do so.

We understand you provide a critical service to our communities, especially at a time people most need it. TGNC people, especially TGNC people of color face disproportionate levels of discrimination and violence, it can be this discrimination and violence in food pantries, hospitals, and shelters which puts us at risk. We cannot shelter in place if the shelter is not safe.

Sylvia Rivera Law Project Shelter Organizing Team Members