



Joint Hearing on Youth in Shelters
City Council Committees on Education and General Welfare
April 16, 2021

My name is Leslie Armstrong, and I am the Assistant Vice President for NYC Emergency Housing and Shelter Services at Volunteers of America-Greater New York, the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. (VOA). I would like to thank the Chair of the City Council Committee on Education, Council Member Mark Treyger, and the Chair of the Committee on General Welfare, Council Member Stephen Levin, for the opportunity to submit my testimony.

VOA-Greater New York is an anti-poverty organization that provides services to over 11,000 people every year through emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing in NYC, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester. We specialize in providing housing and services to seniors, veterans, survivors of domestic violence, persons living with HIV/AIDS, and persons with behavioral health and substance use disorders.

VOA-Greater New York operates four transitional family shelters that offer on-site services for our residents, as well as three confidentially-located emergency shelters and scattered safe houses for individuals and their children who have experienced domestic violence. We provide a full range of supportive services to meet the needs of our families with the goal of helping them identify permanent housing and, for the children, we try to provide as “normal” childhood experience as possible. These supports include onsite Department of Education (DOE) Liaisons who help families with school-age children register at schools near the shelter and coordinate transportation for their children.

COVID-19 has been a disruptive and traumatic event for the 264 school-age children residing in our transitional family shelters. They have been experiencing social isolation like so many of their peers throughout NYC, but they face additional challenges because their families are also experiencing homelessness. Our children rely on daily school meals from the DOE to meet their nutritional needs, and they did not have the devices, connectivity, or physical space to easily accommodate remote learning at the onset of the pandemic. Too many still struggle with inconsistent connectivity.

VOA-Greater New York staff has been an essential resource to the residents of our transitional family shelters as they manage the impact of COVID-19 on their children. Our team has been helping parents apply for unemployment and enhanced SNAP benefits and delivering DOE school meals right to their doors each day. Our case managers have worked in partnership with DOE Liaisons to ensure our youth have devices and internet connectivity to facilitate remote learning. Upon learning that some of our youth had difficulty with remote learning in small, shared rooms with their parents and other school-age siblings, we helped them secure noise-cancelling earphones to help them concentrate on their instruction without background noise.

Despite our efforts to ensure our children have the equipment and resources they need to keep up with their learning, a number of them have received “Promotion in Doubt” letters from the DOE. According to data from the DOE from January 2021, students living in shelters had the lowest attendance rate of any student group in NYC. Given the uneven impact of COVID-19 on youth experiencing homelessness, it is paramount that the City deploy its resources to counter the learning loss that youth in shelters have experienced over the past year. A portion of the \$6 billion of federal COVID-19 relief funding that the DOE receives must be allocated toward providing youth in shelters access to the supports they need to recover academically. This includes provision of adequate transportation to summer, afterschool, tutoring,

and social-emotional support programs and bringing these services to our shelters when it is practical to do so.

VOA-Greater New York supports proposed legislation (Int. 150-2018) to require the creation of a task force regarding the transportation of students experiencing homelessness. The Mayor and the DOE have shown great commitment to youth in shelters by providing resources to ensure they have regular transportation to the school system. Notwithstanding, there are several areas of improvement that deserve careful study by the proposed task force.

Our families have experienced long waiting periods for their children to be incorporated into transportation routes. One particularly egregious case involved a differently abled youth who resides at our Regent Family Residence on the Upper West Side and relies on a wheelchair for mobility. The nearby subway station does not have a wheelchair accessible entrance, so he was unable to attend classes for six weeks due to delays in assigning him a bus route. The proposed task force must review interagency protocols to ensure transportation is provided promptly for students in shelter, with adequate accommodations for differently abled students.

We have also observed a need to increase the number of buses and routes servicing our youth. There have been cases where students are scheduled for a 5:00am pickup time to be dropped off at their school at 8:00am. Sleep deprivation resulting from the early pickup time noticeably impacted how those students performed in their classes. Our youth are often precluded from participation in after-school or summer programs because bus routes are unable to accommodate activities outside of regular school hours.

Lastly, VOA-Greater New York supports proposed legislation (Int 0139-2018) requiring the DOE to report on student health services in correlation with student housing status for students in kindergarten through grade eight. Access to disaggregated health services data will help us advocate effectively for the needs of our clients and tailor our programs to meet these needs.

On behalf of VOA-Greater New York, I would like to thank the Committees on Education and General Welfare for providing us with a platform to discuss the challenges that youth in shelters face in New York City, particularly in their interactions with the school system. We are grateful for the leadership of Chairs Treyger and Levin and look forward to partnering with you both in your advocacy for students experiencing homelessness.

Respectfully submitted by:
Volunteers of America - Greater New York
135 West 50th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10020