

# Stringer Cites Substandard Conditions In Numerous City Homeless Shelters

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, December 28, 2015 5:30 pm

A week after Mayor de Blasio reshuffled the Department of Homeless Services, City Comptroller Scott Stringer released an audit Dec. 21 that said the agency often housed families in moldy, rat-infested and unsafe shelters. His report also stated that only 14 Program Analysts were assigned to oversee services at 155 shelters housing 12,500 families.

The Comptroller's Office found 53 percent of 101 randomly selected units had evidence of rodents, roaches and other vermin. Also, 87 percent raised health and safety concerns including broken smoke detectors, mold, peeling paint and blocked fire escapes.

## 'Ashamed of Treatment'

"I am ashamed of how the city has treated these children and their families," Mr. Stringer said. "We can no longer tolerate the status quo because this is not a failure of policy, it's a true tragedy."

As the city responds to a near-record level of homeless residents—which peaked at almost 60,000 in

October—Mr. de Blasio two weeks ago announced a three-month review of DHS and temporarily named Human Resources Administration Commissioner Steven Banks to replace departing Homeless Services Commissioner Gilbert Taylor, who resigned.

Mr. Stringer also called for the Mayor to hire a Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services with the "skills and experience necessary to create a bold new plan of action on homelessness" to replace Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, who stepped down in September. "The Mayor has a lot to do and we have to let him manage the entire city," he said. "But I think it's important to send a signal that we're going to bring in a manager, a top manager, Deputy Mayor-level, to do this job." (The Mayor has spoken of a nationwide search for a replacement.)

There are three types of family shelters under DHS oversight: Tier II facilities which offer three daily meals to at least 10 families, non-profit-managed cluster sites in residential buildings and hotels converted to shelters. The Comptroller found that DHS allowed shelters to "self-monitor," had inadequate oversight over those inspections, didn't meet nine-month timelines to help families



## 'NO EXCUSE FOR DEPLORABLE CONDITIONS'

'NO EXCUSE FOR DEPLORABLE CONDITIONS': While the de Blasio administration reorganizes the Department of Homeless Services, City Comptroller Scott Stringer said Dec. 21 that the agency was too understaffed to monitor unsafe conditions in family shelters. 'I am ashamed of how the city has treated these children and their families,' he said.

transition from shelters into permanent housing, and relied on verbal agreements rather than written contracts at 64 locations. Because each Program Analyst was responsible for overseeing an average of 900 families, they told auditors it was unreasonable for them to be aware of all shelters' conditions given their high caseloads.

Though the audit reached as far back as fiscal year 2013, it also included more-recent anecdotal experiences from families. The head of one household, suffering from asthma, was sent to the hospital and her children experienced nosebleeds after moving to a shelter three days after a fire in a neighboring apartment left the room smelling of smoke. In September, the mother of a two-month-old child at a cluster site told auditors of a broken stove emitting gas that remained in disrepair for at least four months. It was replaced after investigators notified DHS, but they found the oven broken in a subsequent visit.

### **DHS: Won't Allow Repeats**

DHS, in its response to the audit, said it was given the money to hire 40 more staffers, including two Program Administrators and 15 Program Analysts. Mr. Banks said in a statement, "Unhealthy and unsafe conditions in shelters are unacceptable and will not be tolerated."

The DHS said that since the city created the Shelter Repair Squad in May, the first systematic effort to repair and inspect shelters, it addressed 12,000 building violations, closing 83 percent of issues while creating plans for remaining ones. Responding to findings that there were too few security guards, as well as broken cameras and locks, the agency said it planned to hire 260 more peace officers. Ninety-four shelter contracts were registered by Mr. Stringer's office and a dozen more were expected to be completed shortly.

"As part of the comprehensive operational review just announced by Mayor de Blasio, we will carefully consider the issues raised in the audit and other reviews of the department's operations so that we can continue to improve shelter conditions and safety and help more individuals exit shelter as quickly as possible," Mr. Banks said.

Mr. Stringer said his investigation was a more-up-to-date and granular version of the Department of Investigation's March report that found serious health and safety violations in 25 DHS-run shelters.

### **Mayor: Addressing Issues**

Mr. de Blasio said the city moved 22,000 people from shelters, mostly using rental-assistance programs. During a roundtable with reporters last week, he said, "we've made a lot of changes and improvements since the DOI report," while declining to comment directly on the audit. "I can't speak to the totality of the Comptroller's report, because I haven't seen it, but I can say that we've addressed a number of the issues that came up in the Comptroller's report," he said.

Pressed by reporters on whether Mr. de Blasio was to blame for the failures, Mr. Stringer—who has been mentioned as a possible primary challenger to the Mayor in 2017—declined to assign blame.

“We’ve had this issue through multiple administrations, but here’s what’s hurting us: we’re spending too much time assigning blame to ‘Mayors past’ and ‘Mayors future’ and we’re not spending enough time solving the problem,” he said.

Governor Cuomo, who is expected to offer some of his own solutions in his Jan. 13 State of the State speech, has directly criticized the Mayor, with his aides in November telling reporters that he “can’t manage the homeless crisis.”

### **Doing Street Outreach**

Two weeks ago, Mr. de Blasio unveiled the Homeless Outreach & Mobile Engagement Street Action Teams, which will increase homeless-outreach staff by 140 to about 312 workers, and reassigned 40 more police officers to a 70-person unit to clear up encampments and deal with those who may be emotionally disturbed.

The New York Civil Liberties Union announced a notice of claim against the city Dec. 21 on behalf of three homeless residents after sanitation workers in October destroyed their belongings, IDs and medical supplies while cleaning an encampment near a school. “No matter how much pressure the city is under to address homelessness, all people deserved to be treated with basic humanity,” said NYCLU Executive Director Donna Lieberman.