

“There is no safe haven from the crisis”

Interviews with homeless families in New York City

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World Socialist Web Site reporters went to the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) office, run by the city's Department of Homeless Services (DHS). The office is located in a depressed neighborhood in the Bronx.

The brick and concrete building itself, surrounded by a high fence, was anything but hospitable. Uniformed, armed officers were the only visible people to greet clients. The entrance to the building had two baggage inspection machines. Residents later told us that the authorities routinely confiscate cameras and cellular phones with cameras in them.

There were several families entering and exiting PATH when we arrived, and others just outside the premises feeding young children. Many of the people there were recently homeless, and most were poorly informed about procedures and requirements for obtaining emergency shelter.



Jeannell

Jeannell, a young mother with her child, said, “I was working at a fast food restaurant. I got laid off Friday. Some people there were only one day a week, that’s at \$7.25 an hour. My friend got a paycheck at \$32. It’s horrible. I was living with my aunt but the conditions of her lease wouldn’t allow us to stay with her, and the landlord said we had to leave.

“This stuff going on here,” she said, indicating the PATH office, “is horrible. They give you turkey and cheese to eat but you can’t bring in your own food. My child is on a special diet so I have to sit outside and feed her.

“They say they want to help people, but I got rejected for services here because I didn’t have the proper documents. I asked them what I needed, and they said that it wasn’t their job to tell me what documents I have to bring. I had to take my child to a hotel and then bring her back again the next day. I found out that I needed a letter telling them that I couldn’t stay with my aunt because of the lease. And then they take hours to make a call to check things out.”

We also spoke to Charmaine, who said, “It took me 13 hours to get registered, and I didn’t get into a room. It’s so terrible because if you don’t have an eviction notice or can’t prove you’re a victim of domestic violence, there’s nothing [the intake officers] will do.

“I fled here because I can’t stay in the system [at home] where everybody knows everybody. I didn’t get a room. They just made me come back to a file domestic violence complaint. I had to get up at 5:00 AM to get here on time from where I’m staying.

“This needs to change. I’ve been looking for a job since I got here, but with the amount of time I spend just trying to get housing, I’m not getting back in time to do much. I worked all my life paid my taxes. Why can’t you get a place to stay if you need it, if you are a citizen of the United States? What is the problem?”

Another homeless mother, Ashlyn, said she was losing \$120 by missing a day’s work from her job as a cashier. She and her husband and child had to leave the temporary residence they were living in because the owner was taking drugs and became abusive. “It was a domestic violence issue,” she said. “But the people here say I can go back.

"I think it's terrible what they're doing here. We stayed in a shelter for a little while and they give you small quantities of food. One day they gave us two slices of pizza for three people. They treat you like a bug that needs to be squashed. My father won a Purple Heart in Vietnam for saving someone's life. I was accepted at four-year university, and the people here told me that I'd lose my benefits if I attended. They'll only allow you to attend a two-year community college. I feel that I should have been allowed to attend."

Rubin

Rubin

We spoke to a young worker, Rubin, who had come to find housing with his wife and infant. "It's humiliating," he said. "The city kicked us out on the street. We can't go back to the projects. We cannot afford to rent or stay anywhere else. I had to spend \$600 on a hotel. The only way you can come back into the system once you've been refused is to have the police escort you."

As Rubin was speaking, a police cruiser pulled up with a family that was seeking services in the system. "You see," said Rubin. "This is what's happening. Just like that. I had to call the police to get a one-night pass for my family."

"You're entitled to go to Brooklyn for a hearing if they refuse you a room. But that takes 60 days. I have been denied services four times. After you spend a night here and you get refused service, they give you 48 hours to get your things. Then they throw them away."

Rubin said that he had lost his job because of all the time he had spent trying to get his family a place to stay. "Any day of the week, I bet you'll meet 50 people here who lost their jobs because of the time they spend trying to get into the system."

Rubin pointed to a young mother feeding her child in a stroller. "Look at where they eat. This is because we're not allowed to bring food into the center."

Commenting on the scale of the economic crisis, he said, "There are people here from Michigan. There is no safe haven from the crisis." He complained about security guards, who seem to get a kick out of throwing denied families out of the office. "The security guards laugh at us while we're getting thrown out," he said.

<http://www.wswn.org/articles/2009/nov2009/nyc2-n21.shtml>