



# STREET TO HOME: A HOUSING FIRST APPROACH TO ENDING CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY) is an anti-poverty organization working to end homelessness in Greater New York by providing housing, health and wealth-building services to individuals and families experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Founded in New York City in 1896, we are one of the largest providers of human services in the region with 70+ programs across New York City, Westchester County and Northern New Jersey.

## OVERVIEW

In 2022, VOA-GNY began the Street to Home pilot program, a ‘housing first’ model designed to bring chronically homeless individuals off the street and subways and directly into supportive housing, bypassing the shelter system altogether.

Now over three years into the pilot, Street to Home has proven to be a great success, with 150 clients served—88 of whom have signed leases to remain in their SRO unit and several others who have moved into alternative housing.

**As both a powerful housing intervention and an opportunity to fill supportive housing vacancies, Street to Home has the potential to end chronic street homelessness in New York City.**

<sup>1</sup> Hogan, Gwynne. “NYC’s Unsheltered Homeless Population Reaches Highest Number in More Than a Decade.” *THE CITY - NYC News*, 13 June 2024, [www.thecity.nyc/2024/06/13/nycs-unsheltered-homeless-population-reaches-highest-number-in-more-than-a-](http://www.thecity.nyc/2024/06/13/nycs-unsheltered-homeless-population-reaches-highest-number-in-more-than-a-decade/#:~:text=for%20all%20things%20NYC,.NYC%20Department%20of%20Social%20Services)

## BACKGROUND

Each night, thousands of unsheltered individuals choose to sleep on New York City’s streets, subways, parks, and other public spaces.<sup>1</sup> The experiences of these individuals are as diverse and complex as their needs. Many have untreated mental health issues. Others are dealing with layers of trauma from as far back as childhood.

NYC has a unique ‘right to shelter’ and outreach teams regularly offer shelter beds, yet chronic street homelessness persists. Some individuals actively avoid the traditional shelter system due to personal safety concerns, prior bad experiences, a reluctance to share congregate spaces, concerns about rigid rules, and feelings of defeat from repeatedly trying and failing to navigate bureaucratic systems.

Despite their reluctance to accept offers of shelter, many individuals would gladly accept permanent housing. However, the application process for supportive housing can be arduous, with complex documentation requirements and multiple assessments and interviews—a drawn-out timeline that can be difficult for an unsheltered person to navigate.

Meanwhile, as many as 1,950 vacant supportive housing units sit ready for move-in across the City<sup>2</sup> while supportive housing providers struggle to fill units due to delays

[decade/#:~:text=for%20all%20things%20NYC,.NYC%20Department%20of%20Social%20Services](https://www.crainsnewyork.com/real-estate/decade/#:~:text=for%20all%20things%20NYC,.NYC%20Department%20of%20Social%20Services).

<sup>2</sup> Small, Eddie. “City Council passes bill requiring online database of vacant supportive housing units.” *Crain’s New York*, 12 Sept. 2025, [www.crainsnewyork.com/real-](http://www.crainsnewyork.com/real-estate/decade/#:~:text=for%20all%20things%20NYC,.NYC%20Department%20of%20Social%20Services)

and challenges during the application and referral process.

Street to Home was designed to tackle these concerns: Offer people a compelling housing product, house them immediately, and streamline subsequent application processes.

## STREET TO HOME PILOT

The Street to Home pilot program was started in August 2022 by VOA-GNY in partnership with the NYC Department of Social Services (DSS), Human Resources Administration (HRA), Department of Homeless Services (DHS), and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

The pilot moves individuals into four VOA-GNY programs in the Bronx and Brooklyn that offer fully-furnished, single-room occupancy (SRO) units with access to kitchens, restrooms, and showers, as well as on-site case management, substance use recovery and support groups, recreation activities, and other support services.

Once placed, staff work with clients to develop individualized treatment plans that align with their personal goals and ensure linkage to resources needed to successfully adjust to life in the program, maintain permanent housing, and ultimately leave homelessness behind for good.

## TIMELINE

### Step 1: Outreach and identification

Homeless outreach teams identify chronically street homeless individuals and assess their needs, wants, and what it would take to get them off the street and into a safe placement. Once they establish rapport, teams introduce the Street to Home option as a pathway to SRO supportive housing,

without having to enter a traditional shelter or a safe haven.

### Step 2: Street to Home referral

If individuals show interest in Street to Home, teams work to familiarize them with the program and get them comfortable with the potential placement by sharing photos and videos and scheduling a tour of the SROs.

### Step 3: Street to Home tour

Street to Home staff take prospective tenants on a tour of the building(s) that might be a good fit for them, including viewing staged units. Clients have the agency to choose their preferred building and the unit that works best for them.

### Step 4: Unit preparation

The selected unit is quickly readied for occupancy, including a fresh coat of paint, linens, and household essentials. NYC pays VOA-GNY a three-month “unit hold” fee to provide a source of revenue *even though no lease or supportive housing eligibility determination is yet in place.*

### Step 5: Individualized care

Street to Home staff work with residents to learn their goals and assess needs, using a dynamic and trauma-informed approach to address the factors that have contributed to their ongoing homelessness, including:

- Connections to health, mental health, and substance use services
- Establishing or replacing documents (ie, NYS ID, birth certificate)
- Support with applications for supportive housing and/or housing subsidies
- Establishing public assistance cases

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[estate/new-york-city-council-passes-bill-requiring-vacant-supportive-housing-units-database](#). 5,092 total units vacant: 950 linked to tenants preparing to move in, 2,200 offline for significant repairs, leaving 1,946 ready for move-in.

- Completing biopsychosocial assessments
- Coaching on life skills such as maintaining a healthy environment and personal hygiene, as needed

### Step 6: Lease-up or move-out

Once the supportive housing and rental assistance applications are approved, the tenant signs a lease agreement allowing them to receive ongoing rental assistance to cover the bulk of their rent, and tenants begin paying their share of the rent monthly. As an added incentive, CityFHEPS tenants' share of the rent is capped at \$50 per month, allowing residents to save and enjoy a higher standard of living.

Upon the execution of the lease, VOA-GNY receives payment for any social services tenants may need under the building's supportive housing contract.

Tenants can stay in the SRO as long as they like, or they can transport their rental subsidy to a traditional apartment.

## PROGRAM SUCCESSES

### Place to call home

Street to Home has served 150 people, with 88% of the 81 units enrolled currently occupied. 88 total leases have been signed to date, and 67 of those are current residents. Nearly all current residents have lived in their unit for at least a year, with 80% there for at least two years. Even those who do not ultimately sign leases make significant progress on their personal journeys towards stability, often securing alternative housing.

### Quality housing

The lion's share of end-of-line outreach subway placements can be attributed to Street to Home, suggesting this is the most desirable option offered to clients. Unit quality is important as well: 78% of clients who view a Street to Home unit accept it.

### Quick turnaround

The typical time between DHS street outreach engagement and referral to VOA-GNY is two weeks. Once clients tour the apartment, they can move in within one business day.

### Road to stability

For many Street to Home participants, coming inside affords them the ability to address physical and mental health challenges and begin to heal from the traumas that landed them on the streets. Of the 54 people who have chosen to leave the program, more than half have moved on to positive or neutral placements—including securing alternative housing and reuniting with family—rather than going back to shelters or homelessness. In each of these cases, Street to Home supports residents to make the decision that best supports their health and long-term success.

### Safe place for women and transgender individuals

31% of Street to Home clients identify as female and 4% as transgender. This contrasts with the general unsheltered homeless population, which is 21% female and <1% transgender.<sup>3</sup> Program participants report that the privacy afforded by single room accommodations and feelings of safety were driving reasons behind accepting Street to Home housing versus traditional shelter.

<sup>3</sup> HUD 2024 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations." HUD Exchange, 9 Dec. 2024,

files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC\_PopSub\_State\_NY\_2024.pdf.

## Reduced vacancies

VOA-GNY has been successful in matching eligible clients to vacant units quickly and efficiently. Units that had previously sat empty for an average of 568 days are now quickly filled by Street to Home referrals. Once placed, it takes an average of 155 days to get a lease signed. While this exceeds the three-month unit hold fee, we believe that with our suggested reforms, the lease signing process could be expedited further. Regardless, there is still a net increase in revenue due to increased occupancy rates.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPANSION

### Expand pool of providers and units

VOA-GNY has seen the success of this program and is eager to offer the City additional units. Presently, we have at least 60 vacancies across four SROs that are ready for immediate occupancy.

Several other permanent supportive housing providers also struggle with vacancies and may be willing to participate in a program to fill them more expeditiously. There are as many as 1,950 vacant supportive housing units across the City,<sup>4</sup> most of which are concentrated in older buildings that may struggle to attract tenants using traditional referral mechanisms. These resources are going unused when they could be a first step in permanently housing thousands of New Yorkers.

We believe this pilot can be most easily expanded by transitioning clients to units that do not already have project-based subsidies and buildings that are not currently within a tax credit compliance period to allow for speedy approval and lease up. With adjustments to the unit hold

policy to adjust for a longer lease-up timeframe, other housing types may also work. Larger SRO providers are particularly well poised to join this effort as they can leverage economies of scale where staff can work across housing locations to support the completion of applications for supportive housing and rental assistance.

Working with HPD and DSS on a data request, it may be possible to identify what types of supportive housing vacancies are going unfilled and narrow potential stock that could be used to expand the Street to Home Program, particularly those with the fewest restrictions tied to their financing sources (such as those with no LIHTC dollars).

### Expand permissible referral sources

To truly embrace Housing First, the City should allow Street to Home to accept referrals from any program serving eligible chronically homeless individuals, including all street outreach teams, assessment shelters, or specialized community-based providers that create an enhanced sense of safety for particularly marginalized populations, including LGBTQ+ individuals.

## OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

The reforms below would expand the pool of available units and greatly reduce the time necessary to execute leases, increasing stability for tenants and improving the fiscal viability of the model.

### Provide dedicated staffing

While VOA-GNY has been able to succeed with this program using existing staff, we are utilizing two senior leadership team members to handle all supportive housing and rental assistance applications so

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<sup>4</sup> Small, Eddie. "City Council passes bill requiring online database of vacant supportive housing units." *Crain's New York*, 12 Sept. 2025, [www.crainnewyork.com/real-](http://www.crainnewyork.com/real-estate/new-york-city-council-passes-bill-requiring-vacant-supportive-housing-units-database)

[estate/new-york-city-council-passes-bill-requiring-vacant-supportive-housing-units-database](http://estate/new-york-city-council-passes-bill-requiring-vacant-supportive-housing-units-database).

program staff can focus on tenant engagement. For viable expansion, VOA-GNY and future providers need funding for an additional specialist responsible for application completion and follow-up, and to liaise with government partners.

### **Reduce documentation requirements for lease signings**

Even though the City has agreed to prioritize Street to Home tenants for housing, our team often struggles to meet strict documentation requirements to execute leases. On average, it takes Street to Home staff 79 days to complete CityFHEPS applications and HRA staff an additional 41 days to process them. The biggest obstacle to timely submission is satisfying public assistance requirements to have birth certificates and photo identification for each applicant, particularly for persons born outside of New York.

To streamline this process we recommend CityFHEPS to:

- Expedite public assistance case openings by waiving birth certificate requirements for persons born outside of NYS who can otherwise prove their identity (may require an OTDA waiver).
- Allow VOA-GNY to create photo IDs and/or provide expedited access to IDNYC appointments.
- Assign expeditors to quickly open public assistance cases, particularly single-issue cases for persons with income.
- Allow inspections on currently occupied units to reduce disruptions to tenants, in line with other rental assistance programs.

### **Simplify the supportive housing application**

The supportive housing application also requires residents to divulge deeply personal information that goes far beyond the scope of the regulatory requirements for

supportive housing eligibility. When alternative, preexisting documentation—such as a psychiatric evaluation, biopsychosocial, or medical record—of eligible conditions is available, we urge the City to use it. This can spare residents from invasive assessments that can erode trust with staff and hold up the eligibility determination.

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