



Volunteers
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GREATER NEW YORK

2026 SPECIAL REPORT

RESTORING DIGNITY



**A Blueprint for a Trauma-Informed
Shelter System in New York City**

INTRODUCTION

On any given night in New York City, over 350,000 people are experiencing homelessness. An estimated 250,000 people live “doubled- or tripled-up” with friends or family. Another 100,000 people stay in shelters, including more than 32,000 children.ⁱ

City shelters are accessible to all because of NYC’s right to shelter. This unique and valued right has provided a temporary home to hundreds of thousands of people since 1981—but the mandate has also constrained the City’s ability to build shelters according to thoughtful design.

For nearly four decades, the shelter system has had to expand and contract quickly in response to demand. Despite good intentions, the need for beds has had to take priority over intentional design.

As a result, the shelter system is made up of aging, converted buildings—structures rarely designed to accommodate the specific needs of highly traumatized homeless populations. Meanwhile, fragmented ownership of shelters, a lack of capital investment pathways, and stigma against funding homeless services make quality improvements today nearly impossible, despite the best efforts of the nonprofit providers and staff tasked with operating them.

Because of these circumstances, many of NYC’s shelters perpetuate the very trauma the system is trying to help people overcome. To many, shelters feel overstimulating, unsafe, and institutional.

Thousands of New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness—more than 4,500 people—choose to avoid the system altogether and live unsheltered.ⁱⁱ Despite the associated risks, they see the streets as preferable to the City’s shelters.

Improving shelter quality is not simply a matter of comfort or appearance. To truly meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness and provide them the best opportunity to thrive, we must see trauma-informed design as a necessary intervention that influences whether people choose to enter the system, and once inside, supports their well-being and promotes long-term stability.

This report is a blueprint for how NYC can address quality concerns in its shelters by exploring the impact of trauma-informed design and its practical application for people experiencing homelessness, and utilizing case studies from VOA-GNY programs¹ to illustrate both systemic challenges and the solutions within reach.

¹ The shelters featured in this report are operated by VOA-GNY as the contracted services provider. Most of the buildings are owned by the City of New York (where indicated).

A System Not Designed for the People It Serves

Early decisions, lasting impact

When the right to shelter was established by *Callahan v. Carey* in 1981, New York City became the first and only American city to guarantee a shelter bed for anyone in need. The “Callahan decree” also required minimum quality standards for shelters, including bathroom and staffing ratios, on-site laundry, and bedding.

Quality standards were intended to ensure a humane shelter environment, but City approval processes at the time made it difficult to site new buildings that met them. As the City rushed to rapidly expand to meet rising demand, the combination of quality standards and approval processes meant large, publicly owned buildings like armories, jails, and hotels were converted.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why people avoid shelters

Quality in City shelters has been an issue from day one, and shelters have reasonably garnered a bad reputation. Today, New Yorkers experiencing street homelessness continue to cite fears of violence and danger, theft, uncleanliness, pests, strict rules, crowding, smells, and chaos as reasons they avoid the system.^{iv}

NYC’s shelter system, as currently configured, often replicates the very conditions that trauma-informed design seeks to mitigate. Large congregate dormitories, constant noise, lack of privacy, and institutional materials directly mirror known environmental triggers associated with heightened stress responses and emotional dysregulation. With an average length of stay

ranging from 412 (single adults) to 750 days (adult families), the long-term impacts of poor design are amplified.^v Common environmental triggers in shelters include^{vi}:

- **Disruptive sounds:** Doors slamming, overhearing others shouting or in crisis, buzzing lights.
- **Unpleasant scents:** Body odor, mildew, cigarette smoke, perfumes.
- **Lacking security for self and belongings:** Unlocked windows, broken security cameras, isolated stairwells.
- **Visual noise:** Stains, clutter, unclear wayfinding, blind turns, lack of exits.
- **Uncomfortable sensations:** Too hot or cold, buckling floors, poor ventilation.
- **Institutional materials:** Fluorescent lights, ceiling tiles, metal furniture, dismal colors.
- **Crowding:** Large and crowded dorm rooms; narrow hallways; cavernous, echoing spaces in single adult shelters.
- **Confined Spaces:** Lack of space for kids to play, do homework, or enjoy family privacy in family shelters.

For individuals and families already experiencing layered trauma, these environments can reinforce feelings of danger, overstimulation, loss of control, and distrust, actively undermining healing as opposed to promoting it.

Trauma-informed design, therefore, is not an optional aesthetic upgrade, but a necessary intervention to address harm within the current system and to create environments that support stability, safety, and forward movement.



SYSTEMIC BARRIER

SCHWARTZ MEN’S SHELTER (City-Owned)

Large congregate dorm rooms with little to no personal privacy can amplify stressors such as crowding, noise, and lack of security.

System constraints

The New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) oversees over 300 shelters, including transitional shelters, annexes, commercial hotels, Safe Havens, and Drop-In Centers.^{vii} Most of these properties are operated by nonprofits, but many remain owned by the City or private entities.

Over time, as buildings depreciate and require reinvestments, operators are responsible for addressing repairs. However, improvements are constrained by DHS budget structures that limit capital investments.



SYSTEMIC BARRIER

SCHWARTZ MEN’S SHELTER (City-Owned)

Old windows let in water and cold air. DHS instructed VOA-GNY to use temporary shrink-wrap coverings for insulation while our request for funding to replace windows remained pending for months. As a result, windows cannot be opened for temperature control and fresh air, natural light is blocked by the blinds, and the covers contribute to the overall institutional feel of the building.

Operating on expense-based budgets, providers cannot carry funds over year to year to save for larger projects. Nonprofit operators must instead rely on the “new needs” process to secure City funding. Operators submit requests through DHS, which forwards them to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for review—an opaque process that can take months or years before budget authority is released, if at all. Even if nonprofits anticipate underspending or have private funds available to offset costs, they still need City approval to spend them.

With no dedicated funding pool for preservation or revitalization, OMB/DHS often only authorize low-cost solutions or address one physical component at a time, which can lead to reactive repairs, instead of comprehensive investments and renovations. These patchwork solutions do not address the root infrastructure issues in aging

“[Under] the front desk we got a whole sewer. So sometimes we know when we at home and it’s raining, we come in here, it’s gonna be smelling bad... We can’t fault [the clients], people use the bathroom. But when they get clogged up downstairs in the basement... it’s gonna be a bad day. It’s gonna be smelling. We gotta have the doors, the windows, the A/C, everything on... We gotta wear face masks... But, we still come to work. We still work eight hours on top of that... So sometimes we do work in hard conditions, and we still put our best foot forward with the clients. That’s the most important thing.”

FRONT DESK SUPERVISOR | DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTER (City-Owned)

shelters and cost the City more over time.

In some cases, major repair needs go unaddressed for years, presenting serious life and safety violations.

The human cost of these delays is felt daily by both staff and residents, as one Front Desk Supervisor at a VOA-GNY domestic violence shelter describes above.

Quality beyond compliance

NYC shelters must undergo routine inspections to ensure compliance and safety. However, mandated inspections do not address the myriad design elements that influence the experiences and outcomes of people living in shelters.

Traditional inspection checklists fall short of acknowledging the sensory, interactive, and therapeutic elements of a space:

- What is the first impression of the environment upon walking in?
- What are the sounds, smells, and sights in the common areas?
- How loud are the dorms?
- How crowded does it feel?
- Is it easy to navigate?

The answers to these questions inform the experience of people in shelters and shape lasting impressions of the shelter, the provider, and the system as a whole.

For NYC shelters to be both a refuge and a healing environment that encourages independence and supports stability, renovation projects should focus on design interventions that optimize client well-being, and make shelter a more logical alternative to street homelessness for those currently avoiding the system.

This requires a framework grounded in the experiences of the people shelters are meant to serve: trauma-informed design.

Trauma-Informed Design for NYC Shelters

Homelessness and trauma

Trauma-informed design is a key framework when designing for homeless populations, given the prevalence of trauma amongst people experiencing homelessness, the trauma of homelessness itself, and how trauma can affect the behaviors and coping responses of those impacted.

SAMHSA defines trauma as “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” Trauma might be the result of an individual event (car accident, natural disaster), a chronic condition (homelessness, domestic violence), or broader institutional or cultural conditions (racism, homophobia, war).^{viii}

Incidents of trauma are higher amongst homeless populations than the general population,^{ix} with some studies showing that as many as 68-100% of people in shelters have experienced a life-altering traumatic event in addition to their homelessness, such as domestic violence and abuse, institutionalization, crime, or PTSD from combat.^x The accompanying dangers and stresses of being homeless, and negative experiences with some service providers, can layer on actively ongoing trauma.^{xi}

As one framework describes it, trauma involves the “consistent and persistent hauntings of an initial crisis...an extreme stressor that overwhelms the capacity to cope and has

lasting adverse effects on physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”^{vi} In the absence of alternatives, people may develop coping responses to trauma that are difficult to overcome, such as withdrawal, emotional outbursts, or substance use, all of which they take with them into the shelter environment.^x

Trauma-informed design

Before we even interact with people, our bodies have immediate responses to the physical environments we enter. For traumatized individuals, past experiences may make them more fearful of other people and places. If trauma ‘triggers’ are present in a new environment, they can signal danger and activate the body’s stress response, tricking the body into believing a traumatic past event is happening in the present.



The architecture and design of a space can thus directly heighten or calm the body’s response to potential stressors. As the first thing our bodies react to, design can be the first point of contact to create a sense of safety and stability, allowing healing to begin.^{vi}

Trauma-informed design seeks to use the physical environment to mitigate the mental, emotional, and physical impact of trauma by preserving people’s dignity and personal control and reducing triggers and stressors.

Impact of trauma-informed shelters¹

Integrating trauma-informed design into NYC’s shelter system could make a dramatic difference in client well-being, outcomes, and interest in entering the shelter system from the streets.

There is a public misconception that if shelters are “too nice,” residents will not want to leave.^{xi} But shelter is not meant to be a punishment for homelessness, and aesthetics not only have an effect on mood and well-being, but can also support people’s ability to assert control over their future, overall recovery, and ability to move to the next step.^{xii,xiii}

A safe and welcoming environment helps people move beyond attending to their immediate, survival-related needs and lowers emotional stress, creating space to plan and move forward.^{xviii} In family shelters, design that creates space for homework and study could support educational outcomes, particularly important as students living in shelters tend to fall behind in school.^{xiv}

Design may also help improve client outcomes, including mental health, substance use behaviors, and general well-being and outlook.^x

1 While little research on the interior physical environment of homeless facilities exists, case studies, qualitative interviews, and research on similar settings, such as supportive housing, and on the impact of physical environment on people’s sense of identity, worth, dignity, and empowerment can inform the design of supportive and healing environments for trauma-experienced shelter residents.

For example, case studies of trauma-informed design renovations in family shelter bedrooms showed improvements in sense of safety, experiences of dignity, and increased feelings of hope.^{xv} In this way, trauma-informed environments have the potential to improve both client experience and outcomes, preparing people to move to the next step with increased self-worth and confidence.

Design can also influence the credibility of a provider. Agencies perceived as pleasant, beautiful, and well-kept are considered more professional, believable, and capable of providing a higher level of customer service, contributing to a client’s willingness to trust the agency, and the agency’s effectiveness in helping them.^{xi}

Trauma-informed design can also increase safety for other residents by reducing the incidence and frequency of emotional outbursts or negative coping, having a calming influence, and encouraging positive behaviors such as patience.^{x,xi}

Trauma-informed design in practice

With dedicated funding and reformed ownership and budgeting structures, NYC’s shelter operators can implement trauma-informed design modifications through both major capital repair projects and low-cost, high-impact modifications.

Design Resources for Homelessness identifies six fundamental human needs that people experiencing homelessness value and seek out for themselves and their families: dignity and self-esteem; empowerment and personal control; security, privacy, and personal space; stress management and coping; sense of community; and beauty and meaning.^x We will use these as a framework for how trauma-informed design could look in NYC shelters.



SYSTEMIC BARRIER

REGENT FAMILY RESIDENCE (City-Owned)

(Top) Extensive facade damage from plumbing inspections within family bedrooms, an out-of-service elevator, and (Bottom) a non-compliant fire panel sit unfinished two years after a vacate order was issued for DHS to make repairs and fire safety upgrades.

Before it can be reopened, the property requires significant investments to create a safe, supportive environment for families. DHS has approved a limited scope of work with capital funds, but deadlines for completion extend through 2030, despite VOA-GNY's readiness to contribute its own resources to offset costs and project management support. In the meantime, DHS has employed costly fire guards on every floor for the past 10+ years.

DIGNITY AND SELF-ESTEEM

The overall quality and general maintenance of a shelter can influence how residents feel about themselves. Building upkeep, regular maintenance, and adequate cleaning can send the message that people care about your well-being and think “you deserve a nice place to live.”^{xvi}

Physical cues that support a positive self-image, such as one's appearance, can also build confidence in residents and be influenced by good design.^x

Design ideas:

- **Regular maintenance, basic repairs, and thorough cleaning** can improve residents' perceptions of the shelter's quality and their personal well-being.^{xviii,xvi}
- **Replacing broken systems**, such as elevators and fire alarms, can address longstanding health and safety issues, while resulting in savings over time.
- **Address temperature:** Adequate cooling and heating systems can increase comfort and reduce agitation and incidents.
- **Lighting color and placement** around mirrors can reinforce positive self-appearance.

EMPOWERMENT AND PERSONAL CONTROL

The circumstances of homelessness can severely limit a person's control over their life. Strict rules and imposed routines in shelters can further exacerbate this loss of control.

For example, in family shelters, a parent's autonomy over their parenting style can feel diminished. With the shelter operator functioning as the primary authority, parents are limited in exhibiting their own authority and competence—such as welcoming visitors, or selecting babysitters—making it difficult to enforce their own routines with their children.^{xvii}

Dignity and autonomy are closely related to perceived control. Offering more control over a person's physical environment can help increase their sense of self-worth.^{xi} By improving shelter design, we can promote client choice and support clients in regaining a sense of personal control, empowerment, and self-reliance.^{xiii}

Design ideas:

- **Multiple, multipurpose common areas:** Promote choice in gathering areas and engagement in those spaces—to participate with others, withdraw to be alone, or linger nearby to listen.
- **Outdoor/indoor family recreation areas:** Provide opportunities for positive parent-child engagement in family shelters through dedicated space, playhouses, and/or furniture.^{xviii}
- **Changeable frames, corkboards, shelves:** Provide opportunities to decorate and customize personal space.
- **Lamps, curtains, fans, windows that open:** Create the ability to adjust lighting and temperature to personal comfort.

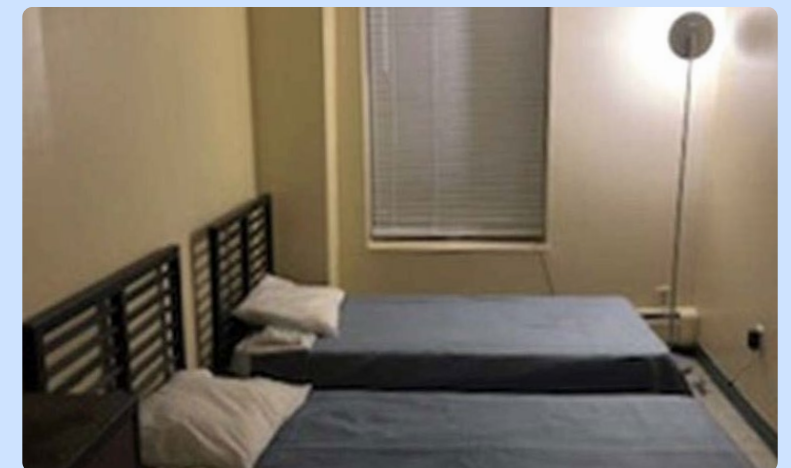
IN PRACTICE

LIBERTY HOUSE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTER

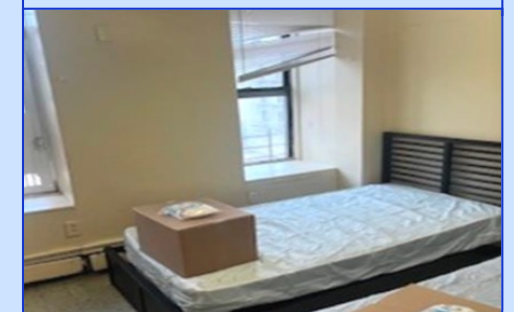
Broken metal blinds and bright overhead lighting created a harsh environment with safety concerns for children.

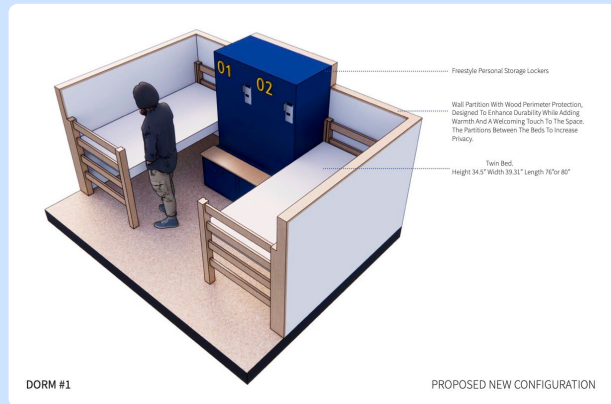
Dimmable floor lamps were added to ease bedtime routines and wooden push-up blinds replaced for safety, calm and a more home-like feel (pictured top right).

Families report the space feels more peaceful and private following the changes. Implementing similar improvements broadly remains challenging within a system that does not consistently fund or prioritize design-focused renovations.



BEFORE





IN PRACTICE

SCHWARTZ MEN'S SHELTER (City-Owned)

Renderings (pictured above) show how utilizing dividers can increase a sense of privacy in the congregate setting while maintaining staff sight lines.

This proposed configuration shows what's possible when operators are given the flexibility to problem-solve.

Renderings by Magnusson Architecture and Planning (MAP)

SECURITY, PRIVACY, AND PERSONAL SPACE

Immediately upon entry, both staff and clients should experience a shelter as both a physically and psychologically safe space.^{xvi}

Privacy, safety, and security go hand-in-hand. Designers must find a balance between ensuring residents have personal space and staff can maintain sight lines.^{xi} Clients must feel that their personal items are safe from theft. Additionally, anonymity and discretion are important safety needs in domestic violence shelters.

Design ideas:

- **Gradual thresholds:** Avoid dead ends or the feeling of being thrust into large open spaces upon entry.
- **External concealment:** Facades should blend in with the surrounding neighborhood, and/or be set back from public view with secure boundaries.^{xviii}
- **Smaller dorms:** Enhance the sense of privacy and safety in shelters for single adults.
- **Built-in niches and nooks; curtains around beds:** Provide space for personal escape, rest, and retreat.
- **Spaces for decompression,** such as libraries; fitness rooms; technology labs; or sensory, meditation, or de-escalation rooms.



SYSTEMIC BARRIER

NEW HOPE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTER (City-Owned)

Spaces intended to support healing and stability—such as this private playground—can remain inaccessible due to funding dynamics. The playground has been closed for over a year due to necessary flooring and concrete replacements because funding and approval structures make even straightforward repairs difficult to execute.

It's disheartening to deprive children of highly visible and otherwise appealing spaces due to small, easy-to-fix issues.

STRESS MANAGEMENT AND COPING

Mitigating the influence of added stressors or triggers is key to creating a sense of calm, increasing the ability to focus, and reducing outbursts and violence in the shelter environment.

Design ideas:

- **Natural elements, outdoor space, gardens:** Exposure to nature (plants, natural light/materials) in shelters increases fulfillment of basic psychological needs; enhances satisfaction, perceived control, and motivation; and reduces frustration.^{xix,xvi,xviii}
- **Noise-absorbing materials:** Dampen noise with plenum windows and textured walls and floors to reduce sense of crowding, stress, and ensure adequate sleep.^{xvi}
- **Avoid industrial materials and provide proper air ventilation:** Mitigate and absorb unpleasant scents.
- **Avoid institutional materials:** Fluorescent lighting, black bunk beds, and certain colors and finishes can evoke traumatizing memories of jail or prison. Strike a balance between aesthetics and practical considerations, such as mitigating bed bugs.
- **Rocking chairs for rhythmic movement, de-escalation rooms:** Incorporate spaces/tools for positive coping and diffusing tense situations away from other clients.



IN PRACTICE

EAST CLARKE PLACE SENIOR RESIDENCE

Residents gather in an outdoor area that provides greenery, opportunities for conversation, and fresh air.

Successful design elements more commonly found in supportive housing can be incorporated into shelter design to replicate a therapeutic environment that supports both recovery and community.



RESTORING DIGNITY

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Promoting positive relationships with staff and other clients can reduce stress and support residents in taking steps toward stability.

Design ideas:

- **Multiple common areas with various types of interactions:** Sitting areas, without blind corners, that are visually connected to other spaces in the building and filled with activities, can encourage positive interactions among residents and staff.^{xvi}
- **Welcoming intake and reception areas:** Reinforce stable and consistent support.
- **Design inviting spaces:** Use ceiling height, natural light, and quality finishes to create common spaces that feel inviting.
- **Round tables:** Support fluid conversation.

BEAUTY AND MEANING

Visual order and beauty can provide grounding and a sense of purpose.^x Incorporating elements of personal and cultural identity provides “a way for people to see themselves in the environment and to be part of something bigger than themselves, combating isolation with a sense of belonging; a way to feel valued after being marginalized.”^{vi}

Shelter design should aim to minimize visual noise and clutter, incorporate artwork and identity markers, and offer space for customization.

Design ideas:

- **Wayfinding devices, sight line features, and clutter management:** Ensure spaces are easy to navigate and free up the ability to attend to deeper meaning and make connections with others.
- **Different colors, patterns, and multi-sensory experiences:** Help people engage the senses and offer visual distractions.
- **Artwork symbolically connected to the neighborhood or community served:** Connect people with a sense of community to combat isolation.
- **Mural walls, gardens, bookshelves:** Provide built-in spaces for personalization and contribution.



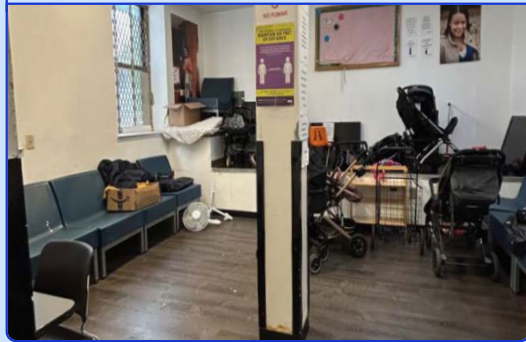
IN PRACTICE

BUSHWICK FAMILY RESIDENCE (City-Owned)

A recreational space was refreshed with private funding to improve comfort, flow, and daily usability for families. Relatively modest, design-focused upgrades were added to reorganize, declutter, and refresh furnishings, creating safer, more flexible areas for play, learning, and group activities. The result is a warmer, trauma-informed space that significantly improves the feel and functionality of the space.

Scaling these types of interventions across the system requires greater autonomy and flexibility for providers to implement changes with their own funding and without prolonged approval processes.

BEFORE



NOT A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH

Trauma-informed design does not follow a single template. The experiences of people facing homelessness are diverse, and effective design must be responsive to population-specific needs.^{xi}

Design ideas:

- **Veterans** often have lasting physical and mental health needs stemming from their service and may benefit from wheelchair accessibility and calming spaces that counteract PTSD and other mental health challenges.^{xx}
- **Chronically homeless individuals** can benefit from design that instills a sense of place, respect, and control, with amenities that encourage them to utilize the support and services a shelter provides, such as computers, WiFi, and mailboxes.^{xx}
- **Survivors of domestic violence** can benefit from private outdoor areas that reduce the risks and stress of leaving the shelter and facing exposure when gathering or playing with children outside.^{xviii}

IN PRACTICE

STOCKHOLM FAMILY RESIDENCE (City-Owned)

(Top) The waiting room is the first space families and children see when entering the shelter, yet it currently feels outdated, cluttered, and chaotic. (Bottom) A rendering shows how modest investments in beautification (brighter colors, plants, child-friendly artwork, and decluttering) could transform the space into one of calm and care, setting the tone from the moment families arrive.

Restoring Dignity: VOA-GNY's Innovative Tools & Projects

The principles above are not theoretical. VOA-GNY has been testing low-cost, high-impact applications of trauma-informed design across its portfolio—and running directly into many of the structural barriers this report describes.

Low-cost, high-impact: VOA-GNY's revitalization project

In 2026, VOA-GNY embarked on a revitalization project to restore dignity to housing programs, using a trauma-informed lens to evaluate and improve overall quality at all properties. Examples of some of these completed revitalization projects are spotlighted throughout this report.

As a first step, VOA-GNY's Real Estate team conducts onsite walk-throughs, using a trauma-informed lens to identify stress points and design gaps. From there, the team develops low-cost, high-impact action plans for each site, prioritizing achievable improvements.

“The goal isn't just to check off boxes, but to really think about whether the property shows care and respect for the people in it.”

VOA-GNY REAL ESTATE TEAM

VOA-GNY's *Property Revitalization Project Evaluation Tool* (Appendix), was created to assess both safety conditions and the overall feel of the space during walkthroughs. Questions touch on trauma-informed design elements:

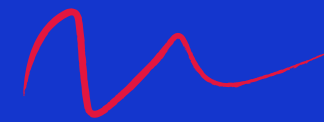
- Are all walls clean, free of graffiti/holes/cracks, and painted? (*Dignity and self-esteem*)
- Do residents have access to private spaces for rest and reflection? (*Empowerment and personal control*)
- Are the walls painted in soothing colors? (*Stress management and coping*)

This assessment tool also aims to create a standardized process for making improvements with a trauma-informed lens. Eventually, the goal is to use findings to create a uniform list of products, colors, and materials to streamline purchasing decisions and reduce costs.



CASE STUDY

Schwartz Men's Shelter (City-Owned)



VOA-GNY's Schwartz Men's Shelter illustrates the challenges of operating and restoring large-scale facilities that are not owned by the service provider and were not originally designed for shelter use—and what is possible with a combination of innovation, funding, policy interventions, and political will.

The 335-bed shelter on Ward's Island is owned by DHS and has been operated by VOA-GNY since the 1980s, when it was repurposed as one of the City's primary intake and assessment centers for single men. Originally constructed in the late 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)-era development of Ward's Island as a summer institutional training facility, Schwartz has significant design challenges for year-round shelter use, amplified by environmental conditions on the low-lying island.

Swampy conditions lead to maintenance challenges, such as water seeping through the floors, and wildlife regularly damaging infrastructure. Internally, lofty ceilings and large, open spaces—including dorms comprised of 100 black metal beds—and a lack of insulation make the building feel institutional and cavernous.

Even when relatively empty during the day, the building can feel overstimulating, contributing to stress for those entering the shelter, many of whom are experiencing acute crisis and heightened vulnerability.

Because VOA-GNY is the operator and service provider, but not the owner of the building, it is difficult to address time-sensitive issues like flooding, leaks, and animal management. Each issue can become an interagency tug-of-war

between DHS, NYC Parks, and VOA-GNY, in which next steps fall through the cracks.

Major necessary capital improvement projects have also historically been a challenge. DHS-approved interventions tend to be reactive and temporary—such as patching leaks or installing plastic window coverings—rather than comprehensive upgrades that address underlying infrastructure and design issues, leading to poor conditions and costing the City more over time.

Trauma-Informed Design Renovation Proposal

After decades of structural issues, VOA-GNY developed a trauma-informed design proposal to transform Schwartz into an environment that supports stabilization, rather than exacerbating stress. In 2024, DHS approved a limited scope of this renovation project to demonstrate proof of concept. The proposal envisions a series of interior renovations to one of four dorms, the recreation room and the dining room to:

- **Increase privacy** by rearranging and adding partitions between beds while maintaining sight lines for security (*Security, privacy, and personal space*).
- **Reduce noise** by adding partitions to make dorms and bathrooms smaller and replacing flooring to absorb sound (*Stress management and coping*).
- **Create a calming atmosphere** by utilizing less institutional materials, such as soothing paint colors and residential-style flooring (*Stress management and coping*).

- **Encourage positive engagement** by installing translucent screens to provide more privacy for group therapy, and creating comfortable community spaces (*Sense of community*).
- **Enhance security** with added stations for staff or security workers near entrances (*Security, privacy and personal space*).

Two years later, as of June 2026, we're grateful that the Mamdani administration has begun implementation of this initial phase and is working collaboratively to map next steps.

While this is a positive first step, significant additional investment is needed to stabilize the facility, address underlying safety issues, and improve overall quality. This includes renovations to three other dorms, bathrooms, and hallways, and investments in major building systems (windows, roofs, facades, and heating/

cooling, plumbing, and electrical systems).

The current Schwartz renovation illustrates what is possible when structural barriers are overcome through political will and effective collaboration. However, the piecemeal nature of the project's implementation creates logistical challenges, delays, and cost inefficiencies.

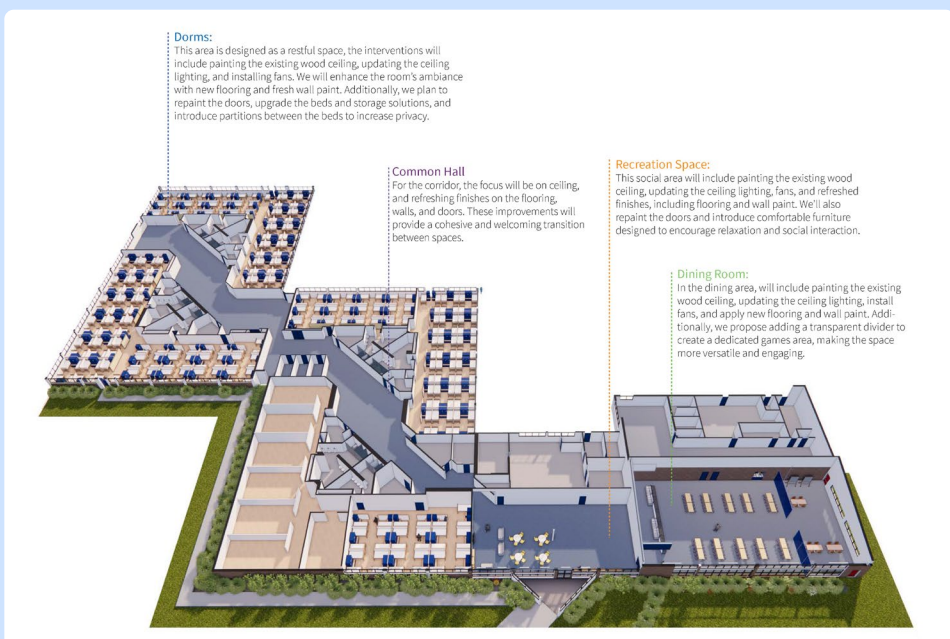
A comprehensive renovation instead addresses the underlying building system needs and aesthetic improvements at the same time, reducing time, expenses, and inconveniences and resulting in a higher-quality renovation.

Achieving trauma-informed design improvements system-wide will require broader policy interventions that enable timely, flexible, and comprehensive rehabilitation of City-owned shelter infrastructure on Ward's Island and beyond.

IN PRACTICE

RENOVATION OF SCHWARTZ MEN'S SHELTER ON WARD'S ISLAND (City-Owned)

Renderings by Magnusson
Architecture and Planning (MAP)



CASE STUDY

Schwartz Men's Shelter (City-Owned)

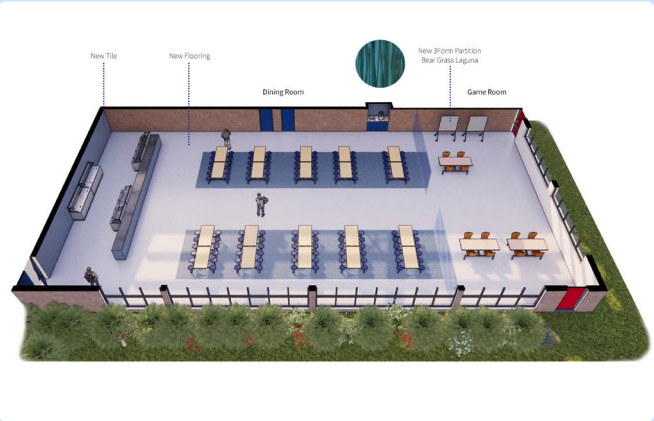
DORMS & BATHROOMS

This area is designed as a restful space. Interventions to paint, update floors and lighting, and install fans, will enhance the room's ambiance, ventilation, and privacy. New partitions will make dorms and bathrooms smaller, reducing crowding and increasing safety.



DINING ROOM

Renovations to this high-traffic area will enhance lighting, ventilation, and noise absorption. The addition of transparent dividers will create a dedicated meeting space, making the room more versatile and engaging.



BEFORE



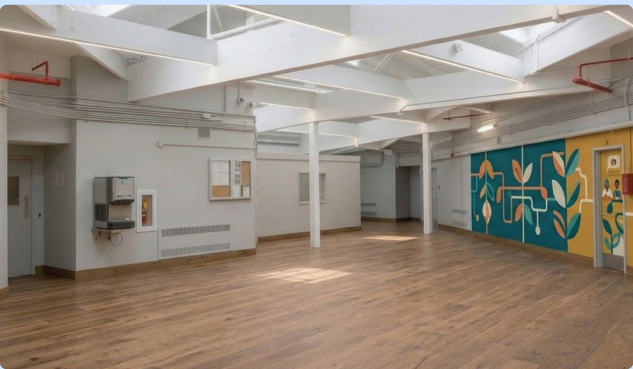
RECREATION ROOM

This social area will be refreshed with paint, lighting, fans, and comfortable furniture to encourage relaxation and social interaction.

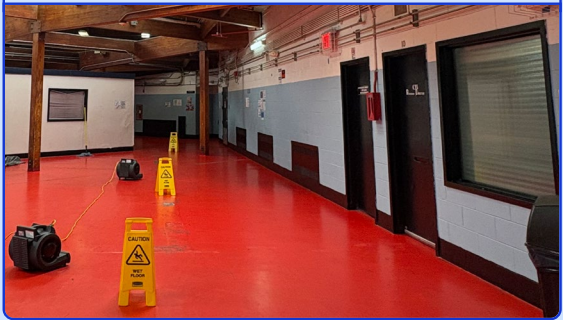


COMMON HALL

Upgrades to this corridor will include ceiling, flooring, walls and door finishes to provide a cohesive and welcoming transition between spaces.



BEFORE



Policy Recommendations

To build a humane shelter system, New York City must undertake fiscal and structural interventions that result in a smaller, more efficient portfolio that shelters people with dignity, supports stability, and promotes rapid exits to permanent housing. We recommend:

1. Prevent homelessness and improve housing outcomes

Investing in programs that improve pathways out of shelter and reduce the number of people becoming homeless will lessen demand on the shelter system and diminish the need for more shelters over time.

The City has recently taken great strides to expand city rental assistance programs by implementing legislation passed in 2023 to ensure certain households at risk of eviction can access rental subsidies without a prior stay in shelter and expand eligibility so more New Yorkers can access stable housing. Ultimately, further investment in CityFHEPS/CHAP will be needed to ensure that everyone these laws are intended to serve can access this critical support and to achieve a dramatic reduction of homelessness.

2. Conduct a capital needs assessment of the DHS/HRA systems

A capital needs assessment conducted by DHS/HRA would reveal which shelters can benefit from reinvestment—and what investments are needed to ensure a dignified, trauma-informed environment.

Assessments can review the status of electrical grids for environmental compliance and air conditioning, ADA accessibility, major building systems (ie; plumbing, boiler, roof), and additional trauma-informed design modifications needed—in line with standard tri-annual practices at NYCHA.

3. Update the DHS model budget and fund building maintenance

Despite historic investments in 2018 to improve shelter conditions with the implementation of model budgets, rates were not indexed to inflation, and shelters are struggling with rising costs.

Updating DHS model budgets, including adequately funding building maintenance, will further support quality-improvement projects. Regular maintenance will also ensure small problems don't escalate into larger, more costly ones that impact residents' quality of life.

4. Create a dedicated renovation and preservation fund

The City must dedicate funding to conduct major repairs and trauma-informed redesign projects in City-owned shelters. Resources could be made available through reinvested savings from converting or taking offline some of the worst shelter environments, or by shedding excess emergency capacity in hotels with short-term contracts. Other emergency family hotels could be converted to shelter single adults more humanely.

Providers could also set aside accruals from underspending into a fund for capital projects that take longer than a single fiscal year to plan and complete. A dedicated fund would allow owners/operators to move away from one-off “new needs” requests and enable long-term planning and lasting renovations.

5. Transfer ownership to nonprofit operators

As both owners and operators, nonprofits could invest directly and leverage independent financing to renovate, repair, and convert shelters. Transferring ownership would unlock provider capacity, reduce delays, improve accountability, save the City money and protect it from risk.

6. Empower nonprofit operators in the capital process

In the interim, operators should be more involved in planning and executing capital repairs. DHS can make improvements to inform operators about projects in their capital plans, consult with operators on design, and share project timelines.

With ample preparation, operators can use their intimate knowledge of sites to provide valuable information, prepare clients and staff to accommodate on-site work, and facilitate temporary relocations or changes in facility operations, ensuring efficient project completion.

Operators should also be empowered to use leftover spend-down funds or private financing for smaller-scale projects without undergoing an extensive approval process with DHS and OMB.

7. Embed trauma-informed design standards systemwide

By establishing design guidelines for all shelters and providing funding for retrofitting, NYC can address avoidance of the system, poor outcomes, and overall system effectiveness. Design guidelines could draw on the framework

of six human needs: dignity and self-esteem; empowerment and personal control; security, privacy, and personal space; stress management and coping; sense of community; and beauty and meaning.

The City previously made efforts to improve the quality of shelters and reduce violations through Mayor de Blasio's Shelter Repair Squad (SRS) initiative, including beginning a set of design guidelines. The City could build on this initiative to develop preservation plans that incorporate trauma-informed design principles.

8. Invest in purpose-built, population-specific shelters

As demand fluctuates, some new, purpose-built shelters should become available. Utilizing demand projections, we can ensure the pipeline is aligned with need, avoiding overbuilding and reducing long-term costs. Building on the success of innovative financing tools championed by DHS, like the Term Sheet for Long Term Shelter Contracts with Nonprofit Ownership, the City can leverage similar tools to accomplish this.^{xxi}

All eight of these recommendations are interdependent. Reducing shelter demand through homelessness prevention efforts allows the system time to respond intentionally. Trauma-informed design standards ensure renovations and new construction translate into better outcomes. And budget and ownership reform enable operators to utilize investments effectively.



CONCLUSION

People experiencing homelessness deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. The way we design shelters reflects whether we mean that.

Shelter should be the first step toward stability, but that only works if it feels safe enough to enter and conducive to healing. Too often, it is neither. Poor design and deferred maintenance don't just create uncomfortable living conditions; they amplify the trauma people are bringing with them through the door, driving thousands of New Yorkers to choose the streets instead.

This doesn't have to be the case.

With reformed funding structures, clearer ownership accountability, and investments that are modest relative to the cost of inaction, New York City has the opportunity—and the obligation—to transform shelter into a place of safety, dignity, and opportunity.

“We should be designing systems as if they are for someone we love.”

FORMER NEW YORK CITY OFFICIAL

About VOA-GNY

Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY) is an anti-poverty organization working to end homelessness in the region by tackling the root causes—beginning with housing stability. Once stably housed, VOA-GNY can help individuals and families access the health and wealth-building services they need to thrive. We're also advocating for better systems and policies to meet the needs of the community.

Over the last 130 years, VOA-GNY has grown to become one of the largest providers of housing and human services in the region with 70+ programs located in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester, serving 35,000 adults and children experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness annually.

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AUTHORED BY KAITLIN ABRAMS

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:

Adam Balasiano

Nicholas Brasse

Taysha Clark-Reid

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Simon Kawitzky

Eric Lee

Chloe Lin

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Noelle Withers

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VOA-GNY Property Revitalization Project Evaluation Tool

This evaluation tool is designed to holistically assess VOA-GNY properties through both practical and human-centered lenses. Some of the questions are about safety and the condition of the building, but others focus more on how space makes people feel. The goal isn't just to check off boxes, but to really think about whether the property shows care and respect for the people in it.

Program: _____ Program Type: _____

Date of Inspection: _____ Population: _____

Arrival Time: _____

Departure Time: _____

Evaluator: _____

No.	Category	Assessment Prompt	Comments
1	Exterior/ Landscaping	Is the exterior/ landscaping welcoming and well maintained?	
2	Safety & Security	Are all entry points secure and well-lit?	
3	Entrance/ Lobby/ Reception	Is the entrance welcoming and free of obstructions	
4	Walls	Are walls clean, free of graffiti, holes, cracks and painted. Is there tape or extraneous signage?	
5	Floors	Are floors clean and well maintained?	
6	Doors	Are doors throughout the property functional, clean, and painted?	
7	Exit Signs & Emergency Lights	Are exit signs illuminated?	

8	Windows	Are windows throughout the facility in working order and clean?	
9	Lighting	Are lighting fixtures throughout the facility operational and do they providing appropriate brightness?	
10	Furniture	Is furniture clean, sturdy, and able to be arranged functionally?	
11	Artwork in Common Spaces	If there is artwork, how is it displayed and does is add or detract from the environment?	
12	Ceilings	Are ceilings free of leaks, water stains, or missing panels?	
13	Common Spaces	Are spaces available for both group and individual activities?	
14	Stairwells	Are stairwells secure, clean, and well lit?	
15	Privacy & Personal Space	Do residents have access to private spaces for rest and reflection?	
16	Comfort & Environment	Are the lighting, temperature, and furniture conducive to a calming atmosphere?	
17	Accessibility & Inclusivity	Are facilities and services accessible to individuals with disabilities?	
18	Community & Connection	Are there shared spaces that encourage social interactions and support networks?	
19	Aesthetic & Psychological Comfort	Are the walls painted in soothing colors?	
20	Health & Well- being	Are air quality and ventilation systems maintained?	
21	Consistency & Predictability	Are program rules and expectations communicated clearly?	
22	Staff Support & Training	Are staff trained in trauma-informed care?	

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Volunteers
of America®
GREATER NEW YORK



135 West 50th Street, 9th Floor,
New York, NY 10020

212-873-2600

voa-gny.org

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