

## Can Mayor Adams Solve Homelessness?

### Introduction

In New York City, a city renowned for its Broadway plays, the longest-standing show is the theatre of cruelty that happens on the city's streets. Since the 1970s, NYC has dealt with a homeless crisis that no public official, advocacy group, or Joe Schmoe has yet to solve. In lieu of solutions, NYC mayors have made the routine street sweeping of homeless encampments the default response to preserving the sanctity of the city and the psyche of its weller-off residents. Unhoused individuals are futilely herded towards large, congregate shelters that bear more of a resemblance to warehouses, urban barns, and jails. Understandably so, not everyone wants to live in conditions that are often marked by a lack of privacy, safety, or care. Per Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE) findings, there are around 2,400 unsheltered individuals in the city, many of whom seek refuge in subways, parks, and on the streets (NY DSS, 2021).

Since assuming office at the start of 2022, Mayor Eric Adams has made the clearing of homeless encampments a priority as part of revitalizing NYC. To date, NYPD officials have confirmed that they cleared over 300 encampments (Hogan, 2022). Mayor Adams has also launched the "Subway Safety Plan" - an initiative to clear unhoused individuals from residing in NYC's MTA system. The plan was conceived in response to growing public safety concerns and accounts of violent interactions involving unhoused individuals on the transit system, including the death of a woman who was pushed in front of a train in January. The ceaseless displacement of people experiencing homelessness and bold statements made by Mayor Adams have been sources of controversy; in a February speech, Mayor Adams likened homelessness to cancer when he remarked, "You can't put a band-aid on a cancerous sore... You must remove the cancer and start the healing process" (Price, 2022).

As the cycle of homelessness in NYC continues, seemingly in perpetuity, the election of an ambitious new mayor has led citizens to wonder – will things change? *Can* things change? Can Mayor Adams solve homelessness? This paper aims to respond to that question.

### Methodology

This paper is stylized in the form of a Q&A between reporters and Mayor Eric Adams. Drawing on my theatre background, I paired each of Adams's answers with an *action* (or *actions*) that indicates the intention behind each response. Both primary and secondary sources were consulted to form the basis of the questions and the content of the responses. Verbatims from Mayor Adams and his team are underlined. Some of the core issues addressed are:

- Criticisms of Mayor Adams's recent policy initiatives.
- How Mayor Adams intends to fulfill NYC's legal obligation to provide a right to shelter for those in need. As a reference, Section 1 of Article XVII of the New York State Constitution states, "The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by such of its subdivisions" (The New York State Senate, 2014).
- Solutions to address homelessness, including the creation of safe havens and stabilization beds, drop-in centers, permanent supportive housing, and affordable housing.

Questions (Q) and Answers (A)

**Q: How do you respond to comments that you are “criminalizing homelessness” and that the actions you are taking to clear encampments are more harmful than helpful? (Price, 2022)**

*Actions: Clarify and Educate*

A:

- No one should be sleeping on the streets. We’re walking past people that are living on cardboard boxes in these makeshift, inhuman houses. This is just not right. (CBS New York, 2022)
- It’s our duty to guarantee shelter for every individual in New York and I take that responsibility seriously. We’re here to help.
- We’ve made a historic investment (largest in NY history) of \$170 Million towards “high-quality services and resources dedicated to helping unsheltered New Yorkers transition off the streets and out of the subway system and move into more stable housing” (City of New York, 2022).
- New measures taken are designed to offer people a safe place to go where they can rest peacefully and access resources:
  - Safe havens and stabilization beds
  - Drop-in Centers
- The investment will fund 1,400 safe havens and stabilization beds and “create 4,000 beds to serve New Yorkers” (City of New York, 2022).

**Q: Are the encampment sweeps a means to get unhoused individuals out of sight in order to beautify public spaces?**

*Action: Galvanize*

A:

- Yes.
- This is about the dignity of our public spaces and the dignity of people whose suffering is on full display.
- We cannot tolerate these makeshift, unsafe houses on the side of highways, in trees, in front of schools, in parks. This is just not acceptable, and it’s something I’m just not going to allow to happen. (Hicks & Raskin, 2022)
- Our children should be able to walk to school without being exposed to people in distress, hypodermic needles on the ground... human waste on the floor (CBS New York, 2022).

- It's important to get people out of these public spaces and into locations that can better their lives. I will not sit idly by and normalize people sleeping on the streets or in subway cars.

**Q: Shelly Nortz, the deputy executive director for policy at the Coalition for the Homeless, has called your comments about cancer and homelessness “sickening” and has stated that “repeating the failed outreach-based policing strategies of the past will not end the suffering of homeless people bedding down on the subway.” How would you respond to Ms. Nortz and others who share her sentiments? (Price, 2022)**

*Actions: Acknowledge*

A:

- The metaphor I used was a strong one. My intention was not to offend anyone but convey the gravity of the situation. In my experience, strong situations require strong metaphors.
- My heart breaks when I see fellow New Yorkers sleeping on trains. (Price, 2022)
- I am concerned about the safety of New Yorkers on the streets and subways. Just in March, there were four violent assaults of people who were sleeping on the street, one that resulted in a death.
- We are not going to abandon those who are experiencing homelessness to lives of suffering and pain and we are not going to allow the betrayal of these individuals to continue any longer. (Price, 2022)
- We are adopting a new multiagency response “with social service and health agencies working in conjunction with the NYPD” (Brand, 2022). Our approach is firm but also rooted in care. We can help those in need, uphold the law, and restore public confidence in our transit system all at the same time. (Price, 2022)

**Q: “Only 39 New Yorkers have opted to come inside” since you began clearing encampments about six weeks ago. How do you respond to this lack of success? (Hicks & Raskin, 2022)**

*Actions: Uphold and Humor*

A:

- It's a start.
- Change takes time.
- It is difficult to convince people to come inside, but just because something is difficult doesn't make it not worthwhile.

- We're going to go with brochures and show – here's what a safe haven bed looks like. This is where you're going to. We're going to show people, here's where we're asking you to go. (CBS New York, 2022)
- We're also exploring the option of paying people to come inside and see for themselves as an incentive and show of goodwill.
- I'm confident that once people experience what the new alternatives are, they won't want to go back to the streets.

**Q: What would you say to protestors of the “Subway Safety Plan” and your approach thus far with clearing encampments?**

*Action: Challenge*

A:

- I would ask them: What are you fighting for? It might turn out that we have the same goal.
- Streets are not places to sleep and the subway system was not made to be housing. It's made to be transportation. (Kramer et al., 2022)
- And if you think we're doing something wrong, please let us know. We are committed to accountability. Because without accountability, nothing will change. (City of New York, 2022a)

**Q: You previously served on the NYPD for over 20 years. How do you respond to reports that your preliminary budget favors more policing instead of more housing, especially with proposed budget cuts to lower the “Department of Homeless Services (DHS) spending from around \$2.8 billion to \$2.15 billion in the 2023 fiscal year?”** (Brand, 2022)

*Action: Assuage and Endorse*

A:

- My job as Mayor is to balance the budget across the board. With operations in our city opening more and more each day, some of the extra allocations of COVID-related funding need to be lessened.
- That being said, we have received valuable feedback and I have listened to that feedback.
- That is why we have revised the budget to include “an additional \$5 billion in capital funding for affordable housing production” (Evelly, 2022).
- With regards to police budgets, I believe in the value of the police but more importantly, I believe in the potential of the police.
- In order to have a high-functioning city, you need to have a safe city.

- With NYPD working in tandem with social workers across the city, the need for their added presence is critical, hence part of the increase in budget for policing.

**Q: How do you respond to accounts that shelters are not safe places to go?**

*Action: Quell*

- I have heard that “people do not want to go into these shelters because they're not safe.” That troubles me. (CBS New York, 2022)
- I take New York’s obligation to provide a right to shelter seriously; more than that, I am committed to ensuring that people have a right to **safe** shelter.
- We are exploring the option of having NYPD and social workers staff our housing options together, serving as resident advisors of sort.
- Police will be there to make sure that no one feels unsafe. Not to antagonize but merely ensure that everyone can sleep peacefully.

**Q: How do you expect to create permanent housing “at a level that is commensurate with the need?”**

*Action: Motivate*

A:

- We need to explore all options and we need to be savvy.
- By repurposing underused hotels, we can create supportive housing faster and cheaper. We can make affordable, permanent housing available to families, seniors, and any New Yorker in need, including our neighbors experiencing homelessness. (City of New York, 2022b)
- With hotel conversions, “affordable apartments can be created for about two-thirds of the cost and in one-third of the time [compared to] ground-up construction.” (City of New York, 2022b)
- We’re also working with New York’s housing credit agency to steer more low-income housing tax credit properties outside of the city so that people have more options for where they can live.
- At the end of the day, I want people to have options and I want those options to be good options.

**Q: Criticisms of permanent supportive housing via a “housing first model” are that the housing units enable drug use and tolerate destruction of property and violence? How would you respond to such criticisms of this “harm reduction” approach? (Sandberg, 2022)**

*Actions: Educate and Embolden*

A:

- It's important to not conflate harm reduction with enabling destructive behavior.
- We are working to guarantee that wrap-around social services are a part of each "housing first" effort.
- I'm committed to building partnerships with different community organizations and nonprofits to collectively ensure that people who are transitioning to permanent supportive housing are set up to succeed.
- We have discussed:
  - Encouraging volunteerism as a way to build community and improve one's life through service to others.
  - The importance of tenant coalitions.
  - Communal oversight.
  - Block leaders.
- And to be clear, if someone is a harm to themselves, their environment, or others, they will be transitioned to homes with more oversight and support. Everyone's needs are different, so our hope is to meet people where they are at and help them get to where they want to be.

Closing

I am open to feedback and suggestions. If you're a changemaker, an advocate, and most importantly, someone directly experiencing homelessness, I'm here to work with you, not against. Change is possible.

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