



# **SAFE HORIZON: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT NYC MAYOR**

## **INTRODUCTION**

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The 2021 Mayoral general election comes at a time of great reckoning for the City of New York. Over 33,000 New Yorkers have lost their lives due to the COVID-19 virus over the past 17 months. The next Mayor will have to rebuild a city decimated by loss – of loved ones, of employment opportunities, and of the connections that bind us together.

The next Mayor will need to urgently address the alarming rise in gun violence and hate violence that are deepening scars in our neighborhoods and causing more New Yorkers to fear violent encounters on our streets. At the same time, the next Mayor must build meaningful and lasting trust between law enforcement and Black and brown communities across the five boroughs by re-imagining the future of policing, public safety, and criminal justice responses to violence and abuse; prioritize housing stability for those impacted by violence and abuse as a basic need for safety; and invest in economic stability strategies for survivors.

For the last 43 years, Safe Horizon has offered hope, healing, and comfort to New Yorkers impacted by violence. Our client-centered, trauma-informed approach takes into account the impact of racism, and we strive to uphold the dignity and humanity of everyone who walks through our doors. Through natural disasters and terrorist attacks, fraught economic times and a world-wide pandemic, Safe Horizon has always been here to help New Yorkers recover and heal.

As we navigate turnover that will re-shape city government, we urge new leaders in elected office to build on what we and our colleagues in the victim services field have learned over decades about how best to respond to children and adults who have been harmed.



## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

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(1) Survivors of violence and abuse understand their safety better than anybody. And safety, healing, and justice may look different for every survivor. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to public safety, survivors need the city to invest in a range of safe, viable options so they can make their own decisions and navigate their path forward.

For example, survivors may define the words “accountability” and “justice” differently. For some, it includes an expectation of the criminal justice system to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate the person who caused harm. For others, it includes a restorative justice process where the person responsible for the violence or abuse takes full ownership of their actions and commits to repairing the harm. A survivor-centered approach to public safety will create options for accountability and healing that match more closely with what survivors want.



(2) City agencies and the providers who contract with them must be fully accountable to survivors. That includes acknowledging when we each have implemented policies that have caused hardship, racial harm, and traumatization to our staff and to our clients. In order to repair that harm, city agencies and contracted service providers must commit in good faith to centering a racial equity framework in the pursuit of public safety.

For example, the City must address the racial disparities in child removals by the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and repair the racial harm caused by the child welfare system. We recognize that ACS has committed to engaging in this reparative process, but we urge the next Administration to deepen and expand this work. The work of addressing and eliminating unconscious biases of child protective investigators and ACS attorneys as well as determining when and how children are removed, for example, require sustained attention in order to reduce harm to children and families – without compromising child safety. ACS leadership must honestly and transparently communicate how they are addressing racial inequities throughout the agency, from top to bottom. This in turn can create opportunities for more accountability regarding progress and encourage ACS staff and partner agencies to deepen their anti-racism work.



## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED



(3) While violence and abuse occur across socio-economic lines, the impact falls particularly heavily on low-income communities of color. The lack of adequate financial resources, limited access to safe, affordable housing, and generations of justified mistrust of law enforcement and the criminal justice system can leave survivors with few paths to safety. A true public safety strategy must include investments in under-resourced communities, including a dramatic increase in affordable housing and economic opportunities.

(4) Successive Mayors have relied heavily on the non-profit human services sector to house, shelter, safety plan, and provide other critical services for survivors of violence and abuse. Indeed, non-profits employ nearly 18% of the total workforce in NYC. But City budgets systematically underfund these essential services, impacting a sector comprised largely of women and people of color. In order to ensure the continued viability of our sector and treat our workforce fairly and equitably, the next Mayor must commit to fully funding contracted services and enable non-profits to pay salaries that are both **competitive** and **livable**. The next Mayor must value our frontline staff not just with parades but with contracts that guarantee a living wage.





## RECOMMENDATIONS: PUBLIC SAFETY/CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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### **Invest in restorative justice programs.**

Not every survivor of violence or abuse calls the police. Not every survivor who calls the police believes the criminal justice system will adequately address their safety. And not every survivor who calls the police receives the support they need. In order to allow for true accountability and reduced risk of further violence, the next Mayor should increase investments into community-based restorative justice programs across the five boroughs. These programs bring together survivors, people who have caused harm, community members, and specialized providers to emphasize accountability and a commitment to repairing harm.

### **Re-direct funding and responses from the NYPD to community-based solutions.**

Communities are demanding transformational change at the NYPD, which warrants a comprehensive review of policies and practices regarding use of force, accountability, transparency, neighborhood policing, and organizational culture. We urge the next Mayor and Commissioner to commit to training its officers on the history and legacy of racist policing strategies and engage in a process of introspection and healing.

The next Mayor should also strongly consider using alternatives to law enforcement to respond to individuals in mental health and/or substance abuse crises. In most cases, an outreach team consisting of peers and behavioral health specialists can help safely stabilize the individual and more effectively connect them with services and care.

Similarly, while the police should continue to respond to emergencies that warrant their presence, officers should no longer be tasked with conducting outreach to people experiencing homelessness on the subways or other public spaces. This work should instead be handled by human service





## RECOMMENDATIONS: PUBLIC SAFETY/CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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professionals who can help engage and connect homeless New Yorkers with supports.

We need increased investments in violence-interrupter programs that help to stop community violence before it escalates and the victim services that respond to the trauma of individual and collective experiences of community violence. A more robustly funded community-based response will help connect persons in crisis with much needed services and reduce the risk of violence or death at the hands of the police. Of course, this also requires that the City sustainably invest not just in outreach but in the community-based services that New Yorkers in crisis need to heal. A truly trauma-informed approach to interpersonal and community violence will benefit communities, the NYPD, and the City as a whole.

### **Build understanding of trauma with NYPD & communities.**

Organizations like Equal Justice USA have invested considerable energy into bringing police officers and heavily-policed communities together to share experiences with trauma and its impacts. These discussions allow for vulnerability and shared understanding of what it means for police officers and community members to repeatedly witness and experience violence. This shared understanding can in turn reduce the prevalence of needlessly adverse interactions between law enforcement and communities. The next Mayor should consider adopting a similar model for New York City to help forge stronger partnerships between the NYPD and the communities they serve so they can work together to find and create solutions.

### **Nominate judges who understand the dynamics of domestic violence.**

The next Mayor will appoint family and criminal court judges to the bench who will hear many hundreds of cases each year involving domestic violence and make rulings that impact survivors' lives for years to come. It is essential that these judges better understand the complex decisions that survivors make for themselves and their families, and work with them and their attorneys to craft decisions that increase paths to safety and healing.





## RECOMMENDATIONS: PUBLIC SAFETY/CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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### **Expand services for children impacted by sexual violence.**

Sexually abused children sometimes reenact their abuse, causing harm to other children. This may be misidentified as a sex offense, resulting in criminal charges that compound the damage to children and families. Juvenile justice involvement is unnecessary when access to effective community-based services are available. We urge the Mayor to invest in services to address reenactment of sexual trauma, strengthen families, and create opportunities of healing for young people who have experienced violence and abuse.

### **Commit to closing Rikers Island.**

A powerful, multi-year advocacy effort led primarily by formerly incarcerated individuals led the current Mayor to agree to close Rikers Island and replace it with smaller jails in communities with more on-site rehabilitative services. The violence that continues to plague the jails at Rikers is unconscionable - for those who are incarcerated there and those who work there. We urge the next Mayor to close this facility once and for all, and to invest in the housing, job development, treatment, and other supports needed to strengthen and empower communities, which include people who have caused harm.



# RECOMMENDATIONS: HOUSING JUSTICE

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## **De-silo shelter systems for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.**

There are currently three main shelter systems in New York City – one for domestic violence (DV) victims, one for homeless youth, and one for everyone else who finds themselves without a place to stay. While the DV shelter system (operated by the Human Resources Administration [HRA]) and general homeless shelter systems (operated by the Department of Homeless Services [DHS]) are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Social Services (DSS), the homeless youth shelter system is overseen by the Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD).

Complicating matters even further, DSS and DYCD report to different Deputy Mayors, reducing the likelihood of program coordination. While New Yorkers may move between systems, the lack of service coordination impedes paths to healing and stability. The next Mayor should direct the aforementioned Commissioners to all report to the Deputy Mayor for Health & Human Services and help ensure continuity of services between all three shelter systems.

## **Make housing subsidies & access to affordable housing options available across shelter systems.**

The lack of coordination between shelter systems means that certain housing subsidies are available to residents of shelters overseen by DSS but not by DYCD. This inconsistency means homeless youth must leave shelters designed to most effectively meet their needs to enter another, often less-welcoming shelter system in order to qualify for a housing subsidy. Similarly, young people in homeless youth shelters have no priority status to apply for public housing, unlike their peers in the other shelter systems. Finally, the city has made Special One-Time Assistance (SOTA) grants available to individuals and families residing in DHS homeless shelters but not to residents of HRA or DYCD shelters. The next Mayor should put an immediate end to this fragmented service delivery system and ensure that paths to housing are equitably distributed between the three shelter systems.

## **Increase housing subsidy value.**

Recently passed City Council legislation (Intro 146) will increase the value of housing subsidies to the fair market housing rate, and in so doing will open the doors widely to many more apartments for individuals and families trying to exit shelter and obtain sustainable permanent housing. This common-sense solution will help scores of shelter residents find housing and stability, and the next Mayor should work with advocates to ensure the subsidy rates are aligned with actual rental costs and that landlords accept these vouchers.



Additionally, the next Mayor must fix the CityFHEPS benefits cliff. A last-minute change to Intro 146 increased CityFHEPS allowable rents but did not increase the income threshold for ongoing eligibility. This change will force people to choose between working and keeping their homes. Cycling in and out of homelessness is traumatizing. The next Mayor must ensure that New Yorkers are able to achieve housing stability and economic mobility and success.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS: ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

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### **Commit to funding flexible microgrants for survivors' needs.**

Too often the survivors and young people that come to our programs for help need small amounts of money for immediate needs – clothing for a job interview, a bus ticket to a safe location, a phone bill to help stay connected to social supports. These small expenses are often the one thing standing in the way of safety. The next Mayor should create a fund - outside of the criminal justice system - for low-barrier direct microgrants that prioritizes choice, flexibility, and timeliness.

### **Create educational and economic opportunities for survivors.**

Economic stability and independence are foundational to safety. So many survivors don't have the choice to leave their abusive partner, even if they want to, due to economic reasons rooted in systemic sexism and racism. The next Mayor should work with providers to create low-barrier meaningful workforce development and educational opportunities for survivors that take into account different individual needs.

The next Administration should also work to eliminate barriers, like asset limitations in public assistance, that prohibit survivors from working, building wealth, and rising out of poverty.

### **Guarantee a universal right to counsel in immigration proceedings.**

Barring federal funding to guarantee universal right to counsel in our immigration courts, the City and State should build on existing programming that provides attorneys to detained individuals in immigration proceedings and invest in direct legal services and supports for undocumented folks, especially for those in removal proceedings.





## RECOMMENDATIONS: ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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### **Create an economic stability strategy that centers the health, well-being, and safety of the most vulnerable New Yorkers.**

Our clients are especially vulnerable to an economic downturn. During this pandemic, undocumented survivors, runaway and homeless youth, and Black and brown survivors lost what little they had – employment, housing, childcare, etc. They continue to struggle in ways that others can't imagine. The next Mayor must commit to rebuilding in a way that centers the needs of our city's most vulnerable. And the Mayor must proactively prepare a plan before the next economic downturn or recession to ensure our collective stability and safety.

### **Include anti-poverty measures as part of a comprehensive public safety plan.**

New Yorkers all want public safety. As the next Mayor creates and implements their plan to address public safety and the current rise in violence, they must approach public safety more broadly. For many of our clients, safety means health, mental health, economic stability, housing, and so much more. The next Mayor should intentionally invest in communities and work to end poverty when investing in public safety measures.

### **Fully fund the nonprofit sector.**

The City of New York contracts with nonprofits to deliver the essential services so many New Yorkers rely on – for food, for safety, for shelter, etc. However, the City too often asks our community of nonprofits to do more with less and to accept the bare minimum. This means that many - too many - nonprofit human services workers, the majority of whom are women and people of color, are barely surviving on the wages paid by underfunded City contracts. Because many survivors come into victim services work to help other survivors, City funding for the nonprofit victim services sector is an economic justice issue for survivors. To live up to our shared values of equity, equality, and supporting communities, the next Mayor must commit to fully funding the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA), the Indirect Cost Rate Initiative (ICR), and other fair and just investments to our sector and to fully funding city contracts at appropriate levels to allow non-profits to offer competitive **living wage** salaries. Pay equity is a racial justice issue, a gender justice issue, and an economic justice issue.

## CONCLUSION

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The next Mayor will face so many challenges. The Mayor should turn to victim services and antiviolence organizations like Safe Horizon for guidance. We know all too well how racial justice, gender justice, criminal justice, housing justice, and economic justice are connected.

**For more information, please contact:**

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