

Guide to Commonly Used Terms and Acronyms Used in Homelessness and Housing Policy

The **Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness (ICPH)** created this guide to help the public navigate the terms and acronyms commonly used in the family homelessness field. The guide covers government agency names, laws, public policies, terms, phrases, and acronyms that may be found in research, articles, laws, websites, and conversations about family homelessness in NYC and nationally. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list. Please email INFO@ICPH.org with suggestions for terms that you would like to see included in future updates.

3-K (3-K for All) – Free (during school day) or low-cost (for select extended day) preschool for three-year-old children in New York City, offered in NYC Early Education Centers, District Schools, Pre-K Centers, and Family Child Care (home-based) settings, though each are held to the same educational standards.

Administration for Children's Services (ACS) – New York City government agency that promotes the safety and well-being of children and families.

Adult Families – Families receiving services from New York City's Department of Homeless Services (DHS) under the designation of Adult Families are those without any minor children. These family structures can vary. See DHS for more information.

Affordable Housing – Traditionally defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as housing which costs less than 30 percent of the resident's gross income.

Aftercare – Programs and services that support individuals or families after they have exited shelter and moved into permanent housing.

Afterschool Programs – Programs that engage children and youth in safe environments during out-of-school-time hours, generally after school or during the summertime. In NYC, many Afterschool Programs are funded by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) and often operated by non-profit community-based organizations at local schools, shelters, or in the community.

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – Federal program established in 1935 that contributed a significant amount of funding towards cash payments for children in families with low or no income, with criteria for eligibility determined on a state-by-state basis. Replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 1996.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) – Federal legislation signed in 2009 created in response to the Great Recession. Provided stimulus funds to HUD to promote stability in communities impacted by the financial crisis, among other objectives.

Area Median Income (AMI) – The midpoint of a specific area or region’s income distribution. Half of the households in the area earn more than the median and half earn less. AMI is sometimes used to determine eligibility for certain subsidized programs related to housing such as vouchers and is calculated each year by HUD.

Cash Assistance (CA) – Cash benefits or financial assistance provided to families with children, single people, and adult families who are in financial need and meet certain criteria. Following passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), CA is accompanied by work/educational activity requirements. Largely funded by federal dollars through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and formerly by Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) but additionally funded in part by each state and administered at the state level. Cash Assistance might also be referred to as Public Assistance (PA).

CityFHEPS Vouchers – The City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (CityFHEPS) is a rental supplement that helps low-income individuals and families afford housing in New York City and state by paying a portion of their rent.

Chronic Homelessness – The HUD designation for experiencing homelessness over an extended period, typically for at least 12 consecutive months or on at least four separate occasions in the last three years, totaling 12 months, while also living with a disability. Might also be used generally to refer to individuals experiencing homelessness for an extended duration or for multiple periods of time.

Cluster Sites – Shelter units in privately-owned residential buildings that house both rent-paying tenants as well as DHS clients. Their use was greatly reduced in NYC during the de Blasio administration.

Commercial Hotels – In NYC, hotels operating in a for-profit capacity in which rooms are rented for families and individuals in need of shelter. These facilities often lack services required by New York State Tier II shelter regulations. The rooms are rented in for-profit hotels by non-profit operators under contract with the City.

Continuum of Care Program (CoC) – A federal HUD program designed to promote community planning and strategy around addressing homelessness and to assist those experiencing homelessness in accessing the resources and services they need to move into more permanent housing. Originally three separate programs administered by HUD — the Supportive Housing Program, the Shelter Plus Care Program, and the Moderate Rehabilitation/Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Program — combined into one.

Department of Education (NYC DOE) – New York City agency that manages the city public school system. Also referred to as New York City Public Schools.

Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) – New York City agency which funds various programs supporting youth and community development around the city to mitigate the effects of poverty. Programs include services for Runaway and Homeless Youth, Afterschool, Community Centers, Immigrant Services, Literacy, Family Support, and more.

Diversion – Programs and services that immediately help individuals or families who have lost their housing to keep them from entering shelter.

Doubled Up – Doubled-up households share the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.

Drop-in Center – Location open 24 hours a day for those experiencing unsheltered homelessness, offering services such as meals and clothing, showers and laundry, counseling and case management, and assistance looking for a job, applying for benefits, or transitioning off the streets. Designed to lower barriers to accessing services and assistance.

Early Head Start – Provides child development and family support services to families of low-income infants and toddlers under age three and to families of low-income pregnant women; part of the federal Head Start program. In New York City, Early Head Start offers free childcare and education to two-year-olds from low-income families.

EarlyLearn NYC – New York City early education program offering free or low-cost childcare for toddlers and infants. Two childcare options exist, differing in setting, type of care, and the ages of children served. Eligibility depends on a family's income and reason for need of childcare.

Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) Program – A time-limited federal subsidy established by the American Rescue Plan Act in 2021 through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (with funding initially authorized through September 30, 2030), aligned with the law's goal to increase economic stability after the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsidy is targeted to individuals and families at risk or with a history of homelessness or those fleeing domestic/intimate partner violence. Participants pay approximately 30% of their income toward rent while the subsidy covers the rest. As of mid-2025, over 83% of the 70,000 vouchers available nationwide had been leased. Around 10 Public Housing Authorities have vouchers to distribute, another 20 are awaiting authorization to distribute more, and over 600 have exhausted their allocation. In New York City, EHV referrals and applications are not currently being accepted.

Emergency Shelter – Emergency shelter programs are temporary residential programs where clients stay for a short period (usually 30 days or less) to avoid unsheltered homelessness and solve immediate crises.

Emergency Shelter Grants Program (ESG) – The Emergency Shelter Grants Program (ESG) was a federal block grant program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). ESG could be used to fund the operational cost of a shelter facility, the remodeling or rehabilitation of a building used as a shelter, services that address the issues that underlie homelessness, street outreach, prevention, and grant administration. The program has since been replaced with the Emergency Solution Grants Program through the HEARTH Act.

Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) – Current federal grant program that provides funds to assist in homelessness mitigation and prevention efforts including engaging with those experiencing street homelessness, improving the number and quality of emergency shelters, rapidly re-housing individuals and families, and conducting shelter operations and services. Grants are provided to cities, urban counties, territories, and states, and the funds may be sub-granted to private nonprofit organizations. Rolled out in 2012 as part of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, it replaced the Emergency Shelter Grant.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – 2015 reauthorization and amendment of the 1965 federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Promotes strategies for educational equity through support to schools. Replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Eviction – The removal of a tenant and their belongings from a rented property by a building owner through an official legal process.

Families Experiencing Homelessness – Language used instead of “Homeless Families,” in recognition of the fact that homelessness is not an aspect of identity and should not be a label, but rather a lived experience that families go through.

Families With Children (FWC) – Families receiving services from NYC DHS under this designation are typically made up of at least one adult and one child under 21 years old living together, a pregnant woman, or a family containing a pregnant woman.

Family Assistance (FA) – New York State’s provision of TANF funds, providing cash assistance for eligible low-income families and operating according to TANF guidelines.

Family Homelessness – The experience of lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence as multiple individuals living together in a familial relationship recognized by their local social services provider.

Food Insecurity – According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Insecurity is defined as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (e.g., without scavenging or stealing).

Head Start – Federally funded programs that deliver services to low-income families, such as free educational services for children between three and five years old. Families typically qualify for Head Start if they receive public assistance or if their household income is at or below the federal poverty level.

HomeBase – New York City’s primary homelessness prevention and aftercare program. The community-based assistance program has grown from a small pilot in 2004 to a national model of homelessness prevention. HomeBase is currently administered by NYC’s Human Resources Administration (HRA) as part of the Department of Social Services (DSS).

HomeBase Providers – Non-profit organizations that contract with New York City government agencies to deliver homelessness prevention services within their local communities.

Homelessness – The experience of lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 – The most recent reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which came with some significant changes. Most notably, the HEARTH Act expanded the definitions of homelessness and chronic homelessness used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; replaced the Emergency Shelter Grants Program with the Emergency Solutions Grant Program to add rapid re-housing as an eligible activity and extend prevention assistance; and consolidated the Supportive Housing Program, Shelter Plus Care, and Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation Program for Single-Room Occupancy Dwellings for Homeless Individuals into the Continuum of Care Program.

Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) – Federal program created under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), which provided financial assistance and services to those at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. The program ended and funds are no longer available.

Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program (Section 8) – Federal rent-assistance program that allows low- and moderate-income families to rent housing in the private market, with eligibility for the program dependent on family size and gross annual income. Commonly referred to as Section 8. General eligibility for HCV requires families to make 50% of the Area Median Income (AMI) or less.

Housing First – A strategy for ending homelessness that provides homeless individuals with quick placement into permanent housing without preconditions, followed by voluntary supportive services as needed.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – Federal law originally enacted in 1975 that makes available a free, appropriate education to eligible children with disabilities and ensures special education and related services; most recently reauthorized in 2004.

Mayor’s Management Report (MMR) – A biannual performance report that tracks how New York City agencies meet key objectives and deliver services. A preliminary version of this report often is distributed known as the PMMR.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (“McKinney-Vento”) – Federal law passed in 1987 to support the rights, identification, enrollment, and education of students experiencing homelessness.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison – A designated school official responsible for ensuring that students experiencing homelessness have access to educational services, helping to remove barriers such as enrollment difficulties and transportation issues.

New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) – New York City agency responsible for developing and maintaining affordable housing.

New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) – New York City agency that works to prevent homelessness and provides short-term emergency shelter to individuals and families. Formerly operated as a stand-alone agency prior to coming under the management of the Department of Social Services (DSS), along with the Human Resources Administration (HRA).

New York City Department of Social Services (DSS) – New York City governmental agency that manages the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS).

New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEECs) – Community-based education centers that contract with the New York City Department of Education and provide EarlyLearn, 3-K and/or Pre-K programs.

New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) – Provides subsidized affordable housing and Section 8 housing in New York City for low- and moderate-income New York residents. Originally created with the assistance of federal funds during the Great Depression, NYCHA remains the largest public housing authority in the United States, housing 1 in 17 New Yorkers and representing 177,569 apartments in 2,411 buildings.

New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) – New York City agency that administers over a dozen social services programs. The Human Resources Administration (HRA) is one half of the Department of Social Services (DSS) and administers programs that provide essential benefits like Cash Assistance, Food Assistance, and Emergency Rental Assistance.

New York State Education Department (NYSED) – State system of educational services that supervises public schools and oversees education standards and assessments, among other responsibilities within New York State.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) – 2002 reauthorization and amendment of the 1965 federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Enacted to improve school and student performance.

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) – 1996 federal law that overhauled the entire federal public assistance system (“end[ed] welfare as we know it”). Provided time-limited assistance contingent on fulfilling work requirements. Replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Point-in-Time Count (PIT) – The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires that each Continuum of Care (CoC) conduct an annual census of sheltered adults, children, and youth and a biennial census of unsheltered persons to be reported in the CoC application. Point-in-Time counts present a “snapshot” estimate of a CoC’s homeless population at a given time. This count must be administered one night during the last seven days of January, collect information on chronically homeless individuals and other subpopulations, and use statistically acceptable methods.

Pre-K (Pre-K for All) – Free (during school day) or low-cost (for select extended day) preschool for four-year-old children in New York City, offered in NYC Early Education Centers, District Schools, Pre-K Centers, and Family Child Care (home-based) settings, though each are held to the same educational standards.

Prevention – Programs and services to help keep individuals or families at imminent risk of homelessness from losing their housing and moving into a shelter or living in a place not meant for human habitation, stopping homelessness before it starts.

Rapid Rehousing – Rapid re-housing models use short- and medium-term housing subsidies to move families quickly out of emergency shelter with services provided to help families maintain permanent housing.

Rental Subsidy – Financial assistance provided by a government-funded program that helps low-income households pay the cost of rental housing. The Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as Section 8, is one such federal subsidy. CityFHEPS is New York’s local rental subsidy program and the largest locally funded subsidy program in the country.

Right to Shelter – Legal concept established through either litigation or legislation that states that a jurisdiction must provide emergency housing to anyone who requests it and meets the stated eligibility standards. New York City and the state of Massachusetts both have Right to Shelter mandates. NYC’s Right to Shelter came about in the 1980s through the series of State Supreme Court cases *Callahan v. Carey*, *Eldredge v. Koch*, and *McCain v. Koch*, and is available to anyone seeking shelter and found eligible. Massachusetts’ Right to Shelter is available for eligible families and pregnant women due to a 1983 state law.

Single Adults – A distinction used to group all individuals aged 18 or above experiencing homelessness not as part of a family.

Source of Income Discrimination – The act on the part of a landlord, owner, or broker of refusing to rent to a current or potential tenant because they intend to pay with housing vouchers, subsidies, or another form of public assistance. Illegal in New York City and various other locations.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) – A federal assistance program that provides grants to states for healthy foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant and postpartum women, as well as to infants and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk. Like general SNAP, applicants must meet certain eligibility criteria.

Street Homelessness – The experience of living in spaces not meant for human habitation, street or unsheltered homelessness can take many forms but might include residing in spaces such as sidewalks, on public transit, under bridges, and in small encampments.

Subsidized Childcare – Free or low-cost childcare programming funded by the federal, state, and/or city government. Eligibility criteria are dependent on locality.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – A federal entitlement program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that provides low-income participants with financial assistance for acquiring food and nutritional education. Eligibility criteria are state-based and often determined by household size, income, resources, and other factors. Formerly known as the Food Stamp Program.

Supportive Housing – Permanent rent-stabilized, affordable housing that features voluntary support services to assist those in need of such assistance, primarily individuals with disabilities.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) – Federal program that provides states with block grant funding for support programs such as cash assistance for low-income families. Established by PRWORA in 1996, replacing AFDC (1935), creating new federal guidelines and work requirements for benefits.

Tier I Shelters – New York City shelters that provided minimal accommodations and services in congregate settings and functioned as assessment centers. Families originally went to these shelters while their cases were assessed, and they waited for placement elsewhere. Housing families with children in these shelters is no longer permitted except in the case of emergency.

Tier II Shelters – New York City shelters that provide private living accommodations and services such as permanent housing preparation, recreational services, information and referral services, health services, and childcare. As family homelessness rose significantly in the 1980s, these shelters were developed as alternatives to crowded Tier I shelters for families with children.

Transitional Housing – A transitional housing program helps residents transition to permanent housing by providing supportive services. HUD funded transitional housing programs serve clients for up to two years.

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth – An unaccompanied homeless youth is one who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. The age range used to define this population varies by agency and program, however the upper limit is usually age 25.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) – Federal agency that administers programs related to homeownership, affordable rentals, and homelessness.

Have a term or acronym you'd like us to add? Email INFO@ICPH.org

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