



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
Oversight Hearing on Housing Insecurity Among Students at CUNY
Submitted by Melanie Kruevelis, Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy
Thursday, January 14, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Melanie Kruevelis, and I am the Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy at Young Invincibles. Young Invincibles is a policy and advocacy non-profit dedicated to elevating young adults in the political process and expanding economic opportunities for our generation. I want to thank the members of the Committee on Higher Education for holding today's urgent hearing on the homelessness crisis facing New York's college students. I want to particularly thank Committee Chair Inez Barron for her tireless commitment to supporting CUNY students.

CUNY had a homelessness crisis even before the COVID-19 pandemic began. A 2019 survey from the Hope Center found that 14 percent of CUNY undergraduates experienced homelessness in a given year. In our own focus groups across the city, we heard about the barriers unhoused students face when trying to earn a degree from CUNY — from the lack of truly affordable housing, to a homelessness and housing system that is not designed with college students in mind. And while many of the challenges outlined by students stem from decades of disinvestment in our public higher education system, we also heard about the ways the policies at CUNY harm students experiencing homelessness. One Hunter College graduate told us about losing her dorm housing the day of her graduation — and becoming homeless the same day as earning her degree.

COVID-19, of course, has made the college student homelessness crisis even more dire. An April 2020 survey of more than 2,000 CUNY students found that nearly *half* are worried about losing their housing during the pandemic. The researchers also found that housing insecurity is strongly associated with anxiety and depression — with serious impacts on students' ability to persist and graduate from college. These findings should be ringing alarms for anyone concerned about New York City's recovery from COVID-19. We know what CUNY means for working-class New Yorkers: About 75 percent of CUNY freshmen are NYC DOE graduates, and the majority of CUNY students come from households making less than \$30,000 a year.¹ The City University of New York can be a driver for an equitable recovery, connecting New Yorkers who've lost work during the pandemic with education, job training, and a pathway to stability. But if we don't get serious about meeting CUNY students' most basic needs, we will leave behind thousands of low-income, Black, brown, and immigrant New Yorkers — the very families who have been most harmed by this pandemic.

¹ Partnering for Education Success in NYC: DOE and CUNY. Summer 2014.
<https://philanthropynewyork.org/sites/default/files/Partnering%20for%20Educational%20Success%20in%20NYC.pdf>



What can be done to address the basic-needs crisis facing CUNY students? It will take proactive leadership at the campus and city level, and a serious push on the state to reverse decades of austerity budgeting for CUNY. We have seen CUNY and the City Council take critical steps during this pandemic to support students experiencing profound instability: earlier in the pandemic, the Council's Food Insecurity Program, a new pilot program that connects eligible CUNY students with \$400 cafeteria vouchers each semester, was reworked once campuses closed in the pandemic, and provided students with mailed checks instead. We also saw CUNY change policies to allow students to visit any CUNY campus food pantry, regardless of the CUNY college they attend, and the creation of the Chancellor's emergency grant program to provide students with one-time cash assistance during the pandemic.

But we've also learned critical lessons throughout the course of the pandemic, and know there is much more work to be done to support the growing number of college students facing homelessness and hunger. As we begin yet another COVID-19 semester, we urge the following:

Recommendations for CUNY

- **Make it easier for students to continue to receive emergency aid through individual campus grant programs.** The December stimulus legislation provides a new round of COVID-19 relief funding to CUNY, including funding earmarked for emergency aid to students. Given how long we went without stimulus support from the federal government during the pandemic, it is entirely understandable that students who have already received emergency aid may need that support again. CUNY colleges must develop a policy that outlines its approach to students requesting multiple rounds of emergency aid funding. Institutions must inform students of that policy in all communication about applying for emergency aid, and on the aid application itself. We also continue to hear from students about complicated applications that create another barrier to receiving aid from their institution. As this additional funding arrives to CUNY's colleges, we urge campus leadership to reevaluate and simplify their emergency grant applications. The non-profit [SchoolHouse Connection authored a 2019 brief](#) on best practices for distributing emergency grants to students experiencing homelessness. We urge CUNY colleges to align their grant distribution with this guidance.
- **Convene a taskforce on student homelessness to develop policies that will support unhoused students, and build a campus culture that destigmatizes homelessness.** As more students experience homelessness and basic needs insecurity, CUNY should convene a group of students, financial aid advisors, service providers, and advocates to reevaluate policies and practices that make it harder for unhoused students to persist in college.

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- **Reenvision existing campus supports, such as food pantries, as hubs for students to receive support with public assistance and housing applications.** Unhoused students are more likely to experience hunger, or have trouble affording MetroCards. Building off of successes with Single Stop offices, CUNY should reimagine its pantries as one-stop shops for students to get support applying for public assistance, such as SNAP. A 2018 survey from HealthyCUNY found that just [under 6 percent of CUNY undergraduates](#) receive SNAP benefits. The survey’s researchers note that many more CUNY students are likely to be eligible for SNAP benefits, based on their income. Connecting eligible students to these existing benefits is a critical step in helping students stabilize themselves during this crisis.

Recommendations for City Council:

- **Convene leaders from CUNY, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), and the Human Resources Administration (HRA) to improve coordination of support and service delivery for college students facing homelessness.** CUNY should enter an agreement with these three agencies to prioritize college students experiencing homelessness in available housing and public assistance programs.

Recommendations for State legislature and Governor Cuomo:

- **Create on-campus liaisons to support unhoused students at every public college in New York.** States like California, Maine, and Washington State have passed legislation, creating liaisons specifically tasked with supporting students experiencing homelessness. These liaisons work to improve campus policies and practices to support students, including financial aid policies that can block unhoused students from college success. They can also collect data on how many students are experiencing homelessness — a critical need as campuses reckon with increased homelessness and financial insecurity among its students.²
- **Provide students experiencing homelessness with priority enrollment in classes and dorm housing.** California and Tennessee have passed statewide legislation requiring colleges give unhoused students first priority in campus housing, particularly housing that is open year-round. New York should also pass legislation granting unhoused students prioritization with class enrollment and on-campus housing.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

² Additional information on these on-campus liaisons can be found here: <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Tips-for-Homeless-Higher-Education-Liaisons.pdf>



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
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Submitted by Zaret Cortorreal, Senior, Lehman College
Thursday, January 14, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Zaret Cortorreal, and I am a Young Advocate with Young Invincibles. I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic. I came to the United States in 2015. I had always wanted to attend college in the US because I understand its importance for my future and well-being. I started school at Borough of Manhattan Community College and am now a senior at Lehman College, studying accounting, with a planned graduation in Spring 2021.

Housing insecurity and homelessness is very real among college students, even before COVID-19. I'm sure it's even worse now given the economic crisis this pandemic has created. Unfortunately, I found myself dealing with housing insecurity while at CUNY. In 2019, I had to reduce my hours from my full-time job to accommodate my full course load of 15 hours. That reduction in hours meant I couldn't afford my rent. I don't have any relatives here, or enough savings to move to a more affordable apartment. I reached out to Single Stop at BMCC, but they did not have a program that would help me with my situation. I applied for a school emergency grant and got no response. I shared my situation with my professors and they connected me to the Office of Student Affairs where I was able to receive food support. However, they could do nothing about housing and I had no choice but to move into a shelter in the Bronx.

As you can imagine, this was an incredibly difficult decision. When the pandemic began, living in the shelter as a full-time student was challenging. The shelter I lived in did not provide the support and resources necessary for students to continue their studies, and some of the shelter's policies made it hard for me to continue my education. For example, the shelter I lived in did not allow residents to use laptops in the shelter, or access WiFi. When classes went online during the pandemic, it became hard for me to keep up with school work, and I was stressed about constantly needing to find places to do my school work. I am grateful that I had my own laptop, as the shelter had a computer lab that was limited to only one hour of use daily. I also was limited in terms of the extracurricular activities that I could participate in, as I had a 10pm curfew. I would often be doing schoolwork in the evenings and would have to ask for late passes which shelter staff were reluctant to give.

About a year ago, I became pregnant. As a result of my condition, in March, I was finally able to be placed temporarily in a dorm at Lehman College until August. This was only made possible with the help of Timothy Hunter, the former CUNY USS President. He heard about my situation from another student Carina Taveras, a formerly homeless student that helped connect me to resources like food. It was only because I was pregnant, homeless, and had a good academic

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standard that I obtained this housing. In August, I had to move out of the dorm. I now can only afford to rent a shared room with a stranger. But this is better than going back to the shelter. The New York City shelter system is terrible, beyond what I have already shared. While I was living in a shelter, I was forcibly moved three times. When they move you, there is no advance notice, and I was even moved at 3am one morning. The city must do better to house people experiencing homelessness.

Even before the pandemic, obtaining affordable housing in New York City is incredibly challenging with numerous restrictions that prevent full-time students from renting low-income apartments. Surprisingly, being a student parent with a newborn does not automatically qualify me for housing. With the onset of the pandemic, it is even more difficult to find an apartment due to the fact that not every office is open or willing to show the apartment. Affordable housing provides developers with a tax credit for housing low-income residents. However, they do not accept full-time students. The city should change this restriction to allow students to obtain housing.

Another major issue is that many landlords do not accept city housing vouchers and that the voucher amounts are too low to actually afford a place to rent. I experienced this when I was looking for an apartment before the pandemic. Due to my housing status, I received a CityFHEPS voucher to help me pay for an apartment. I saw many opportunities to rent, but landlords did not want to rent to me because I had a voucher or the voucher was not enough. Many landlords don't accept the vouchers because the city has a reputation of not paying them on time. By the time I moved into the dorm room at Lehman College, my voucher expired. I tried to renew it so that I could use it to find permanent housing after living in the dorm, but I was told by HRA that I couldn't because I was not living in a shelter anymore. If I wanted to receive the voucher again, I'd have to move back into the shelter. Unfortunately, the only way that I would be guaranteed housing is if I spent three years in a shelter, which would then allow me to qualify for Section 8 housing.

Based on my experience, I recommend that CUNY better support homeless students and prioritize them for free, on-campus housing. Homeless students should receive more help finding housing, such as taking away the "Section 42" clause that limits renting to full-time students. CUNY should work with the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS), NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA), and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to help make housing more affordable for CUNY students, and make sure students living in the city's shelters are supported. I also think it would be helpful for CUNY to track homeless students to help them get the support that they need to complete their education. In addition, more accommodations for students in shelters is needed so that they have access to the technology and internet needed to continue school. Lastly, it is important to increase access to food pantries to all students, including those who are homeless.

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Thank you for the opportunity to share my story in order to help more homeless students obtain the housing, resources, and support that they need to graduate from college.



**New York City Council Higher Education Committee
Hearing on Housing Insecurity Among CUNY Students**

**Submitted by Carina V. Santos Taveras, Homeless Student and Disability Rights Advocate
with both CUNY Coalition for Students with Disabilities and Young Invincibles**

January 14, 2021

Good afternoon. My name is Carina V. Santos Taveras and I am a Young Advocate with Young Invincibles. I want to thank Councilmember Barron as well as members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony today on how COVID-19 has impacted higher education. I am a Bronx native and daughter to Dominican immigrants. I come from a background where opportunities for higher learning were never presented to me because I was a low-income minority child with a disability. Despite the many systemic barriers I faced, I still made it to college and graduated with honors from Hunter College in 2019. There I studied Africana Studies and Puerto Rican/Latino and Community Leadership Studies. Although I graduated from college in the Spring of 2019, the trauma that I endured as a homeless college student made it almost impossible for this accomplishment to happen. I had professors who encouraged me to drop out of school while not having any financial assistance to cover tuition. Struggling with the anxiety of collapsing in class due to starvation, the stress of keeping up my GPA in order to keep my scholarships to pay for school and dorm fees, and not knowing whether I would have safe and stable housing after graduation took a mental toll on me. In my final semester at Hunter College, I spent much of my time studying in the emergency room as I had many seizures triggered due to stress and the barriers I faced alone, including the lack of meals as Hunter College did not have a food pantry during this time. I was not allowed to access the nearby food pantries at John Jay or Lehman College, as I did not go to those colleges.

Struggling with homelessness and food insecurity as a college student truly compromises your ability to function in class and maintain a high GPA, both of which are crucial for students who do not get financial aid like myself, and rely heavily on scholarship support. The reality is that more needs to be done to support homeless college students especially those who do not fit the NYC homeless categories for priority housing! I know this because as a homeless college student I never got any support from my campus. I was often turned away and shamed for being homeless. Once I graduated from Hunter, doors were closed completely to me — I couldn't even use the showers at the Hunter campus anymore. My graduation ceremony was on May 29, 2019 at Madison Square Garden. Hillary Clinton was my Commencement speaker. That should have been an amazing moment, where I should have celebrated my hard work and accomplishment. But I did not. That moment was tainted because I had to rush back to the Hunter dorms to meet the deadline Hunter gave me to move out. Otherwise, I would be charged \$150 that I could not afford. Unlike the other students on my floor who had friends and families helping them move and pack, I was by myself. So, I had to rush out the door of Madison Square Garden. I will never

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forget the date May 30th, 2019: the day after my graduation ceremony and the official day that I became homeless. I managed to meet my deadline and gave my key back to the school. I spent my first night sleeping on the 4 train. After I realized it was not safe to sleep in the trains, I decided to go into the shelter system and that is where I began a traumatizing journey to acquire stable and permanent housing that never happened.

My journey began at the Franklin Women's Intake Shelter in the Bronx, then I was moved to Catherine Street Family Respite Shelter in Manhattan, where I was assigned a case manager that did not speak English and cost me a job interview. I would think the shelter system would encourage clients to seek employment but that was not the case for me. I requested my case manager to give me an overnight pass from the shelter so that I could spend the night at a friend's house, who agreed to help me with my resume, provide me clothes, and a MetroCard to be able to attend a job interview the next day. You probably think these are all things that the shelter can provide but you would be wrong. That is why I reached out for help outside of the shelter. I was rejected for an overnight pass. As a result, I missed my interview, as I had no interview clothing, or MetroCard to get to the interview. In addition to not providing support for employment, the Catherine Street shelter failed to provide accommodations for my seizures despite me providing documentation. Because I kept insisting the shelter meet my accommodation needs, their solution was to transport me in the middle of the night at 2AM while providing no knowledge as to where I was being taken to. That experience was tremendously traumatizing, as it felt like I was being kidnapped and was not given time to collect my belongings. Once I arrived at the destination at 5AM, I learned that I was transported to Van Siclen Women's Shelter located at 710 Hendrix Street in Brooklyn, miles away from my doctors in the Bronx. This shelter in particular caters to severely mentally ill women and substance users. Just to be clear, I am not a substantive user, nor do I have any severe mental illness. I simply suffer from seizures and require a safe and stable environment which this shelter was not appropriate placement for. In addition, this shelter has been in the news for its cruelty towards homeless clients.³ My first night there two fights broke out, and I was not even provided toiletries or a pillow as a new intake.

After two weeks of insisting to meet my case manager at the Van Siclen Women's Shelter and not being served, I was transported once again to the Susan's Place Shelter in the Bronx. At this point I had obtained a paid temporary internship which was an amazing opportunity. But that would also be my downfall. I was told after my 90 day in shelter that because of my full-time, \$15-an-hour internship, I was not eligible for the CityFHEPS housing voucher. I also was not eligible for the 2010E housing packet because I do not have any severe mental illness or a history of substance abuse. In addition, I had my food stamps suspended and my Medicaid

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<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/queens/residents-complain-poor-treatment-brooklyn-homeless-shelter-article-1.1835338>

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cancelled. It was the most traumatizing experience to learn that my internship and the retaliation I endured for reporting my case manager was the reason why I had my food stamps and Medicaid suspended and I was not eligible for the CityFHEPS program — all while still being homeless. Can you imagine that? Having a minimum-wage, temporary job where you are trying to work and do better, but the shelter provides no support, and because of this minimum wage job you are not eligible for housing assistance despite being homeless and living in a shelter. After I learned that the shelter system was not going to help me gain permanent, safe, and stable housing, I left. I could no longer tolerate putting my life in danger and having my Adults with Disability Act (ADA) rights violated. Despite providing documentation of my seizure history and letters from my neurologist the Susan's Place shelter refused to provide any accommodations that would reduce my seizures. For the first time in my life, I had a seizure in public, and I was by myself. Every time I think about that moment, I cannot stop myself from crying, because if I had that seizure while crossing the street, I probably would not be alive today. Once I enter a seizure episode I cannot hear or see a moving car coming my way, as I lose consciousness. Fortunately, I collapsed on the concrete sidewalk, fell head first and only walked away with a few scars on my head. That incident could have been prevented had the shelter system cared to follow ADA protocols. To further emphasize my point of how homeless people with disabilities constantly have their rights violated in the shelter system, I was not the only epileptic at the Susan's Place shelter that had their seizures triggered by the carelessness of staff. This whole journey into the shelter system trying to gain stable housing all could have been avoided had I had support while I was still an undergrad in college. If my school made any efforts to provide immediate counseling assistance for job readiness and safe transitional housing for college students who are graduating, I probably would not have had to experience all the trauma, violence, and seizure episodes I faced in the shelter system.

From my experience, the reality that the New York City shelter system is designed to work as a revolving door for everyone who does not fit the categories for priority housing. Who are the people in the categories that get housing? Families, substance abusers, domestic violence survivors, and the mentally ill always get housing. Everyone who does not fit those categories are forced to either be street-homeless (which is much safer than the shelter, to be honest), or become warehoused. If you are wondering what warehousing means, that is when you live in a shelter because you cannot afford rent, but you are also not eligible for housing assistance, so you become warehoused. This pandemic has made the homelessness crisis among college students, a vulnerable population, far worse than it was before. While colleges are closed, many shelters do not accommodate college students' needs. There are less job opportunities, and room for rent are no longer affordable. If we continue to ignore college students and the young, single, working poor class, we will see another massive wave of homelessness among college students and young working adults just like in 2008. I thank the committee for allowing me to share my story, and shed some light on the harsh realities for young adults in the NYC homeless shelter system.