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PRESS RELEASE

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**STATE ASSEMBLYMAN KEITH WRIGHT, NYC PUBLIC ADVOCATE BETSY GOTBAUM, NYC COMPTROLLER BILL THOMPSON, STATE SENATOR DANIEL SQUADRON, STATE SENATOR VELMANETTE MONTGOMERY AND ADVOCATES FOR THE HOMELESS HOLD RALLY AGAINST RENTS FOR WORKING HOMELESS IN SHELTERS AND OFFER LEGISLATIVE SOLUTION**

*"In the midst of the Great Recession, the last thing New York State needs to do is to punish the most vulnerable of our society. Charging the homeless rent to stay in often squalid and dangerous conditions is preposterous and deleterious to the mission of our State's social service safety net. Therefore, I have introduced legislation to end the practice of charging rent to this already at-risk segment of the population," said Assemblyman Keith L.T. Wright of Harlem, Chairman of the State Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services.*

(New York, NY)- Today, **Assemblyman Keith L.T. Wright, New York City Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, New York City Comptroller Bill Thompson, State Senators Daniel Squadron and Velmanette Montgomery, City Councilmember Bill de Blasio, the NYC Legal Aid Society, the Partnership for the Homeless, the Coalition for the Homeless, Picture the Homeless, Inc. and the NYC Coalition Against Hunger** held a rally on the steps of New York City Hall, to protest the charging of rents to the working homeless in New York State shelters.

This practice, which has only begun to be enforced in New York City by the Bloomberg Administration in the last week, is the result of the misuse of a New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance formula which governs the management of homeless shelters in New York City. With New York City having an impossibly expensive high cost of living, there are more working families in shelters than in almost any other locality in the nation. By charging homeless families rent, the Bloomberg administration is essentially keeping them in the shelter system longer, preventing them from moving on with their lives and costing the State and City millions of more dollars.

The legislation, introduced by Assemblyman Keith Wright, would straight-out prohibit the charging of rents in homeless shelters within New York State. Also, it would force many shelters to relax the rules by which they evict homeless tenants from the shelter due to varying codes of conduct. "Charging homeless families rent to stay in shelters makes it harder to get out of the shelter system and into stable housing. Impeding the transition to permanent housing is a grave mistake, compounded by alarming reports of mismanagement," said State Senator Daniel Squadron.

"This is a senseless policy that must be abandoned. Mayor Bloomberg should recognize that this works against his promise to help people move into permanent housing. Instead of explaining the city's position by saying 'We're told we have to do it, so we're doing it' he should be leading the charge to change the state law, remove barriers to emergency shelter, and help homeless New Yorkers find permanent housing. I am pleased to support Assemblymember Wright's legislation which will put an end to this absurd policy," said New York City Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum.

"It is misguided, at best, to believe that families enter the shelter system for any other reason than out of desperation," said New York City Comptroller William C. Thompson, Jr. "Taking a portion of their limited income as rent is counter-productive. The more families pay to shelter, the longer they will need to remain – at a greater cost to the City – as they struggle to accumulate the financial resources needed to secure a new place to live. Rather than punishing people in crisis, the City should offer constructive assistance that allows families to achieve the financial footing to move back into their own home."

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"Making homeless New Yorkers pay rent to stay in shelters is pouring salt on a wound. In these tough economic times, our government should be supporting the growing number of New Yorkers in need, not punishing them. As Chair of the General Welfare Committee I am proud to support State Assemblyman Wright's legislation but I also believe our City can and must do more now to ease the burden on New Yorker's in need," said Chair of the New York City Council General Welfare Committee Bill de Blasio.

"This policy is poorly conceived and poorly executed and innocent children and their families are going to be hurt as a result. It makes more sense to have a savings program to help families relocate to permanent housing than a 'pay up or get out' policy for families struggling to keep employment in the midst of this severe economic downturn," said Steve Banks of the New York City Legal Aid Society.

"Preventing homeless families who earn far below the poverty line from amassing even the meager savings necessary for a security deposit on a room will force families to remain in shelter longer – costing New York even more in the long run," said Mary Brosnahan, Executive Director of Coalition for the Homeless

"It's unfortunate that the public debate about homelessness is so small, that instead of having a robust policy discussion about how we can address the structural issues that perpetuate homelessness and poverty, we're fighting over rent that poor people should be paying to live in city shelters. Unfortunately, this all harkens back to the Giuliani era when some in government believed that poor people were simply trying to take advantage of the system, rather than understanding that, in reality, we're dealing with families who are trying desperately to get out of shelters into permanent homes," said Arnold Cohen, President and CEO of Partnership for the Homeless.

"The whole point of going into a shelter is to save up some money so you can afford to get a place of your own. People already stay in shelter for too long, and now they're going to stop people from saving up. It's going to be longer shelter stays for homeless people, which just means the city will spend more money," said Linda Contes, Organizer Trainee for Picture the Homeless, Inc.

"We'd like to remind the Mayor that people who are homeless are, by definition, people who are unable to afford a place to live. The policy of forcing people who are homeless to pay up to 50% of their meager incomes is not only draconian, but also bad public policy: it makes it nearly impossible for those people who are working while living in shelters to save enough money to move into rental housing and become self-sufficient. We urge the Mayor to reverse this decision immediately and in order to allow people to work and, in some cases, save their way out of the shelter system," said Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

"This policy will undoubtedly result in our families who need to save money to get out of the run down and unsecured shelter system, having to spend half of their income for the displeasure of staying there. Balancing the budget of the New York City Department of Homeless Services on the backs of the most needy population in the City is poor policy and is downright inhumane. That is why we are here today to gather support for this legislation and to call on the Mayor to leave this un-enforced, as it was for the last twelve years, until we can pass a legislative remedy to this in Albany," said Assemblyman Keith L.T. Wright, Chairman of the State Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services.

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