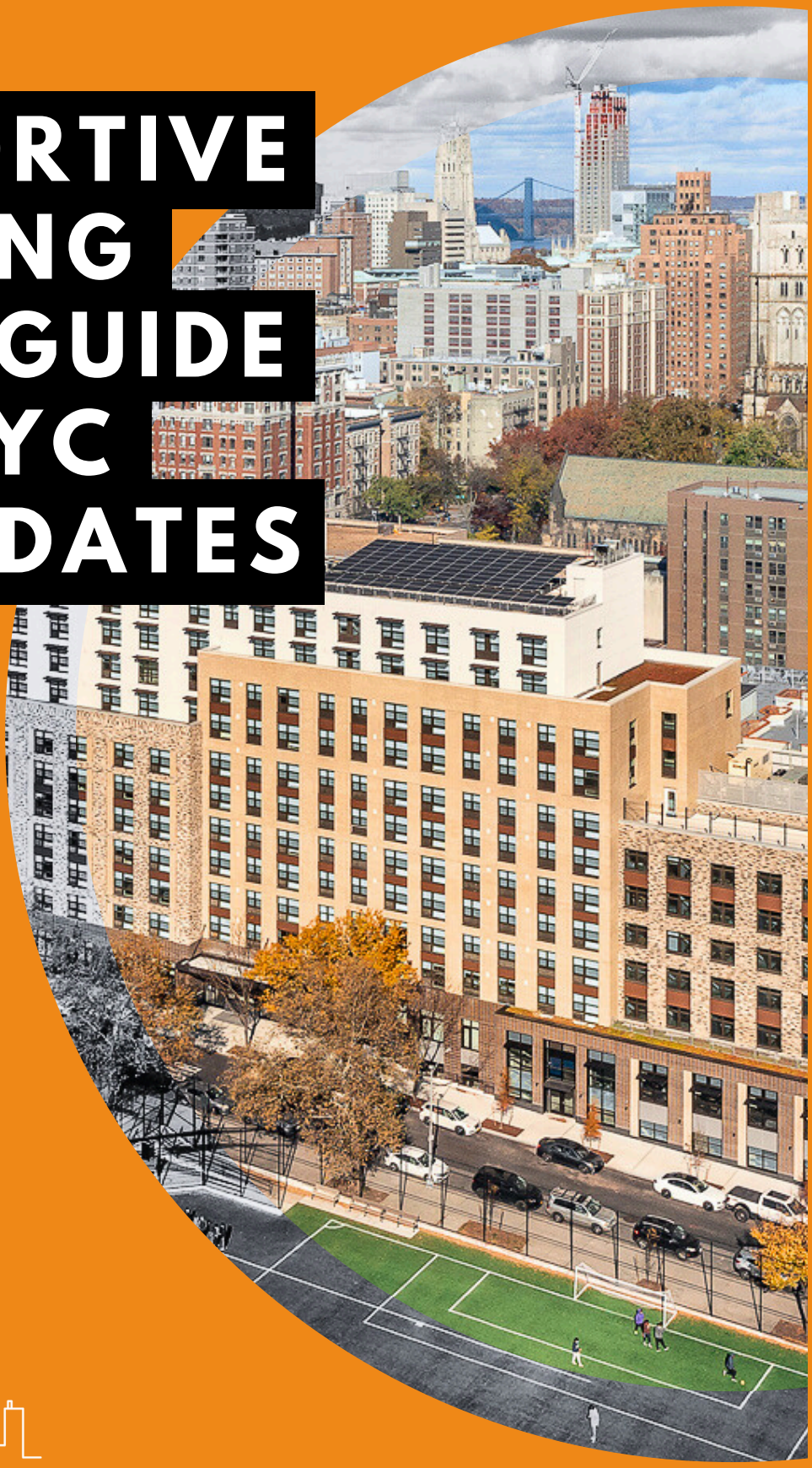
SUPPORTIVE HOUSING ISSUE GUIDE FOR NYC CANDIDATES

2025



the Network
SUPPORTIVE HOUSING NETWORK of NY

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Introduction

Supportive housing is one of New York City's most effective tools for ending chronic homelessness—yet the systems meant to sustain and expand it are under strain. Nonprofit providers are navigating delayed contract payments and financial stress. Tenants are confronting rigid eligibility requirements and shared housing arrangements that do not meet their needs. And at the federal level, the foundational Housing First model is being quietly eroded.

As the city faces record levels of homelessness and housing instability, supportive housing offers a proven, cost-effective solution that combines affordability with wraparound services. But to meet the moment, New York City must strengthen its commitment across five key areas: development and preservation, timely payments to nonprofit providers, access and eligibility reform, adherence to a true Housing First model, and responsive housing design that reflects tenant needs.

This guide outlines current challenges and recommendations to ensure supportive housing remains a stable, dignified, and permanent option for New Yorkers who need it most.

What is Supportive Housing?

Supportive housing was pioneered by New York nonprofit and faith-based organizations as a compassionate and practical response to homelessness among individuals and families struggling with additional barriers to housing stability. It provides permanent, independent, affordable housing, in which tenants hold leases, contribute 30% of their income toward rent, and have access to voluntary support services.

There are two primary models of supportive housing: congregate (single-site) residences, where staff work onsite to provide services to tenants, and scattered-site, where apartments are rented on the private market and mobile services are provided to tenants in their homes.

Pros & Cons of the Models

CONGREGATE (SINGLE SITE)

PRO

- Adds affordable housing to the community
- On-site support services; may include community amenities or retail space
- Builds community among tenants
- Typically owned and operated by mission-driven nonprofits who must be responsive to community and tenant concerns
- Rents remain affordable indefinitely

CON

- Long development timeline, expensive to build and can be subject to zoning, financing and construction delays
- Rising costs for maintenance, operations, and staffing

SCATTERED SITE

PRO

- No development timeline—units can be filled quickly when available
- Units are located across a variety of neighborhoods, offering applicants greater choice in where they live
- More community integration

CON

- Takes affordable units off of the private market; NYC's extremely low vacancy rate and high rental costs limit availability of units
- Many units are not accessible for aging tenants or those with disabilities
- Nonprofits lack control over property management, including maintenance and repairs, and landlord relationship management is not funded through city contracts
- Staff experience high burnout due to extensive travel across geographic area
- Housing can be unstable if landlords do not renew leases or raise rents

Funding

Supportive housing receives funding from a combination of federal, state, and local sources. While congregate housing requires capital funding for development, both models require two main funding streams:

- **Rental assistance (operating):** Covers the gap between what tenants pay (30% of their income) and the actual rent.
- **Service funding:** Supports the social services and case management staff who help tenants remain stably housed.

Nonprofit organizations apply for government contracts to provide both social services and operating support for these residences. In New York City, tenants are referred to supportive housing primarily through the Human Resources Administration (HRA), which makes referrals to over **40,000 units**. HRA also oversees contracts for **10,537 units for single adults**. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) oversees **11,939 units—9,099 congregate and 2,840 scattered-site—serving single adults, youth, and families with children**. The HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA) also refers to and oversees approximately **5,500 units for individuals living with HIV/AIDS**.

Housing Interventions

Supportive housing exists within a broader system of interventions designed to assist individuals experiencing homelessness. While emergency shelters and transitional programs offer critical short-term relief, long-term solutions—such as affordable and supportive housing—are the most effective way to end chronic homelessness.

Though it is part of this continuum, supportive housing is often mistakenly equated with shelters or viewed as the final step in the housing process. In fact, some tenants may eventually move on to other permanent housing or long-term care settings, while others may choose to remain in supportive housing indefinitely.

The following chart outlines some of the interventions available, from emergency shelter to affordable housing.

Short-Term to Permanent Housing Options for Individuals and Families

	DESCRIPTION	DURATION	SERVICES PROVIDED
EMERGENCY SHELTER	Immediate, temporary accommodations, available to every New Yorker	Short-term	Basic necessities (food, shelter) and referrals to other programs, including permanent housing
SAFE HAVENS	Low-barrier with minimal requirements to entry—designed for those who are resistant to traditional shelter	Short-term	Basic necessities (food, shelter) and referrals to other programs, including permanent housing
STABILIZATION BEDS	Short-term, integrated support services to assist in transitioning to permanent housing—high levels of support	Short-term	High-touch support services; case management
OFFICE OF MENTAL HEALTH (OMH) LICENSED TRANSITIONAL	Temporary housing helping with activities of daily living to assist individuals to move to more independent housing	Short to long-term	Daily living skills training, medication management, case management
PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING	Affordable, permanent housing with voluntary on-site services—tenants hold leases and pay 30% of their income towards rent	Permanent	Case management, mental health support, benefits assistance; referrals to external community based resources
AFFORDABLE HOUSING	Long-term, income restricted housing for individuals and families; no embedded services	Permanent	No embedded services

While supportive housing plays a critical role in addressing homelessness, its success depends on policies that ensure its availability, accessibility, and sustainability. To maximize its impact, the city must take decisive action in five key areas: development and preservation, timely payments to nonprofit providers, access and eligibility reform, adherence to a true Housing First model, and responsive housing design that reflects tenant needs.

The following sections will explore these issues.

Top Five Issues

1 Develop and Preserve More Supportive Housing

The NYC 15/15 Initiative aimed to create 15,000 supportive housing units over 15 years, split evenly between congregate and scattered-site. *After sustained advocacy led by the Network, the City has officially committed to reallocating the remaining scattered-site units to the development and preservation of congregate supportive housing.* This marks a major policy win—and a turning point in the City's approach.

The NYC 15/15 initiative is projected to award all units by 2028. As we look ahead, the City must ensure the reallocation plan is fully implemented and invest in the long-term sustainability of the congregate model. Additionally, the City must begin planning for the next phase of supportive housing beyond NYC 15/15.

Recommendations:

- Fully implement the reallocation of NYC 15/15 scattered-site units to congregate development and preservation.
- Begin stakeholder engagement and planning for the next generation of supportive housing beyond NYC 15/15.

2 Pay Nonprofits on Time

Nonprofits carry the city's homeless response system but face delays in contract registration and payment. *Nonprofits are owed hundreds of millions of dollars in delayed contract payments, some dating back several fiscal years.* These delays force nonprofits to borrow at high interest rates—costs that are not reimbursed.

Recommendations:

- Require city agencies to meet deadlines for submitting contract packages.
- Amend the City Charter to track contract timeliness in the Mayor's Management Report.
- Mandate quarterly Procurement Policy Board meetings and public hearings.

3 Improve Access to Supportive Housing

A first-of-its-kind report by the Network, the *State of Supportive Housing*, revealed the complexity of New York City's supportive housing system. With 46 distinct eligibility criteria, spread across 18 different programs and managed by nine government entities, prospective tenants face an overwhelming and bureaucratic process just to access housing. The sheer volume of paperwork, including the cumbersome Supportive Housing Application (2010e) combined with varying documentation requirements across programs, makes securing a supportive housing placement unnecessarily difficult.

Narrow eligibility criteria—especially the city's reliance on the federal definition of chronic homelessness—exclude many who need supportive housing. Under NYC 15/15, individuals must meet this definition, which resets if they spend more than 90 days in institutions like jails or hospitals. As a result, people exiting incarceration often lose eligibility and must spend another year homeless to qualify. This policy fuels cyclical homelessness, burdens the shelter system, and undermines a truly person-centered approach.

Recommendation: The city must work with state agencies, stakeholders, and current and prospective tenants to develop a more streamlined application and eligibility process.

4 Move Beyond a Myopic View of Housing First to a Truly Coordinated System

Housing First has long been recognized as a best practice for ending chronic homelessness, but in recent years, the model has been mischaracterized in both policy and public discourse. Too often, it is reduced to a "housing only" approach that prioritizes placement without recognizing the critical role of voluntary, individualized support services in long-term housing stability.

In practice, Housing First is a comprehensive framework that combines rapid access to permanent housing with robust, flexible services tailored to tenants' needs. Tenancy is not contingent on service participation, but services must be available, accessible, and adequately funded. Without this balance, tenants with complex needs are at risk of cycling back into homelessness.

Proposed changes at the federal level pose a threat to the integrity of this model. *HUD's updated contract language* makes Housing First optional, weakening its position as the organizing principle of supportive housing. This shift enables jurisdictions to reintroduce restrictive conditions such as sobriety mandates or compulsory service engagement—approaches that have been shown to delay placements and undermine housing stability.

At the same time, New York City's Coordinated Assessment and Placement System (CAPS) often fails to match tenants with the appropriate level of care. The Standardized Vulnerability Assessment (SVA) must be recalibrated to better reflect behavioral and physical health needs, including acute conditions such as recent suicide attempts or active substance use. Additionally, tenants should be able to transition between different types of housing—such as licensed mental health housing and independent supportive housing—as their needs change.

Recommendations:

- Affirm New York City's commitment to a true Housing First model that includes both rapid access and comprehensive voluntary services.
- Push back against federal backsliding by maintaining Housing First as the foundation of local supportive housing policy.
- Recalibrate the SVA within CAPS to better capture acute behavioral health needs.
- Create mechanisms for tenants to transfer between housing types based on changing needs and care levels.
- Ensure service funding keeps pace with the complexity of tenant needs, supporting long-term housing stability across the continuum.

5 Listen to Tenants

Last year, the Network convened five roundtables with tenants living in supportive housing across New York State. More than 100 tenants from over 50 organizations shared insights on safety, service quality, staff turnover, and the referral process. Their feedback was consistent: when supportive housing is well-funded and well-run, it transforms lives. But when programs are under-resourced or poorly managed, it creates new challenges for people already navigating complex systems.

A central concern raised by tenants was shared housing—often used by providers as a stopgap amid funding constraints and rising rents. While critics point to vacant units in the system, most are in shared apartments: either rehabbed SROs with communal bathrooms and kitchens, or scattered-site units where unrelated tenants share space. These arrangements are deeply unpopular and often inaccessible for aging tenants, leading to prolonged vacancies and lost rental revenue for nonprofits.

As the city shifts toward building more congregate housing, it must prioritize studio and one-bedroom units for individuals, and larger apartments for families. Tenants placed in shared units often remain stuck due to the permanency of their leases, even when better-suited housing becomes available. Without intentional design, supportive housing risks becoming another barrier instead of a solution.

Recommendations:

- Center tenant voice in supportive housing design and policy decisions.
- Phase out shared housing models in favor of private units that promote autonomy and long-term stability.
- Ensure that preservation and development efforts prioritize accessibility, tenant choice, and robust on-site services.
- Invest in flexible service and capital funding to meet the diverse needs of buildings and residents.

Conclusion

Supportive housing remains one of New York City's most effective responses to homelessness—but its impact depends on sustained commitment and action. As the City moves forward, elected leaders must prioritize policies that expand access, stabilize the sector, and ensure supportive housing meets the needs of those it is designed to serve. The recommendations in this guide offer a roadmap to get there.

Contact Information

Supportive Housing Network of New York
247 W 37th Street, 18th Floor
New York, NY 10018
shnny.org

Tierra Labrada
Director of Policy and Advocacy
tlabrada@shnny.org