**Testimony to the New York City Council**

Committee on General Welfare

November 24, 2020

Good afternoon. My name is John Sentigar and I am a member of the advocacy team at Covenant House New York, where we serve youth experiencing homelessness, ages 16 to 24. I would like to thank the Committee on General Welfare, and Chairperson Steven Levin for the opportunity to submit testimony.

Covenant House New York (CHNY) is the nation’s largest, non-profit adolescent care agency serving youth experiencing homelessness. During this past year, CHNY served over 1,500 young people in our residential programs, and through our drop-in center and street outreach efforts. On a nightly basis, we provide shelter to approximately 200 young people, including pregnant women and mothers with children, LGBTQ+ youth, and commercially sexually exploited youth and trafficking survivors. Our youth are primarily people of color and over a third of our youth have spent time in the foster care system. Many of our young people have experienced abuse or neglect at the hands of parents or other caregivers, and a disproportionately high percentage of our youth struggle with the pervasive impacts of trauma, mental health issues, and substance abuse. We provide young people with food, shelter, clothing, medical care, mental health and substance abuse services, legal services, high school equivalency classes and other educational programs, and job-training programs. All of these services help young people overcome the trauma of abuse, homelessness, and exploitation and move toward stability.

Over four years ago, Mayor de Blasio recommended that “eligibility criteria for the city’s rental assistance program will be expanded to include youth living in RHY shelters at risk of entering DHS shelters. Since the Mayor made this statement in April of 2016, youth in RHY shelters still do not have access to any city rental assistance programs. Time and time again our dedicated and experienced aftercare housing managers struggle to find housing options for young people who were about to leave Rights of Passage (ROP), our transitional living program (TIL), even when the client has met all of their individual and program goals. This can create a bottleneck as a young person in our crisis program will not be able to move into our TIL until there is a bed available. Yet we will not release that bed until we can be assured that the young person exiting our TIL has an appropriate place to stay.

Ultimately, youth who have successfully completed a TIL need access to affordable housing, and a CityFHEPS Voucher would be an essential tool in making that happen. However, since our clients are receiving services from a RHY shelter instead of an HRA-funded shelter, they are currently denied any opportunity to receive an HRA voucher. It simply does not make sense that because a person is accessing services through a different city agency, one that specializes in developmentally appropriate services for their age group, they should be denied a major pathway to achieving housing stability.

While youth in foster care remain an extremely vulnerable population, it is very concerning that youth who are staying in RHY shelters are not given the same consideration when it comes to eligibility for housing and housing vouchers. Advocates have been requesting that youth experiencing homelessness have access to these vouchers for over 10 years, and this has not come to fruition. The current bill presented today continues to exclude the runaway and homeless youth population. Furthermore, we are concerned that this distinction will pin foster care youth and those in the RHY population against each other, competing for limited resources and giving youth in foster care priority over youth who are staying in the RHY shelter system. Ultimately, we believe this bill creates a precedent to continue to exclude RHY from other programs. CHNY believes that both foster care youth and youth experiencing homelessness (RHY) should be included in the at-risk and vulnerable population list. This agreement would allow both youth in foster care and those designated as RHY who are between 16 and 24 years old to access this vital resource without prioritizing one population over the other.

We again thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We understand that the City has difficult decisions to make in this unprecedented time. However, we also know that young people experiencing homelessness in NYC were already marginalized and that the current economic realities will make it even harder for them to break free from poverty. We believe that the recommendation for youth’s time in our facilities to be considered the same as time spent in an HRA facility will go a long way toward ensuring that homeless youth in New York City will be better able to obtain independent and permanent housing. This change to benefit young New Yorkers facing homelessness would go a long way in ensuring positive outcomes and promoting positive systemic change in the face of a rising homeless crisis.

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