Defunding homelessness prevention would hurt seniors and taxpayers alike

Bronx program costs $1,250 per case, or $27,350 less than shelter placement

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Published: May 24, 2017 - 12:01 am

Linnette Samuel, a 60-year-old from the Norwood section of The Bronx, had been living in her small apartment for over 20 years, but when her employer reduced her hours recently, she fell behind on her rent and faced the prospect of becoming homeless.

Rather than ordering her from her home, a Housing Court judge referred Linette to the BronxWorks Senior Homelessness Prevention Project. She quickly developed a bond with her caseworker, who became a trusted advocate.

The program helped her secure funds to cover the back rent, assisted her in applying for food stamps and worked with her to figure out how to pay rent going forward. Linette says facing eviction brought her to tears, especially since she had been working hard all her life, but the support she received from BronxWorks—and knowing they would help her stay in her home—saved the day.

Unfortunately, its homelessness prevention program—which has helped 425 seniors over the past two years stay in their apartments and out of shelters—will have to close its doors on July 1, unless the City Council comes up with $250,000 to keep it going.

That would be catastrophic for the many seniors who face eviction and may end up in costly shelters, instead of remaining in their homes.

Senior citizens are the forgotten victims of New York City’s homelessness crisis. A hidden trend among the alarming number of men, women and children who crowd into shelters every night is that senior homelessness is also on the rise and is projected to increase 30% within three years—and double by 2050, according to the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness.
Nowhere is the situation worse than in the Bronx, which has the highest eviction rate in the city. Some 2,000 people a day are taken to Housing Court there. In 2015 alone, nearly 22,000 families across the city, including older adults, were evicted from their homes and apartments.

Preventing homelessness is not just the right thing to do; it is also the smart thing to do. The BronxWorks program saves city taxpayers significant money: The average cost per case is $1,250, or $27,350 less than sheltering a homeless senior. It works so well is because it offers a comprehensive solution, with housing specialists helping seniors navigate Bronx Housing Court, secure funds to pay back rent, identify and apply for benefits and provide financial counseling.

The program got its start after the recession of 2008, when former Bronx Housing Court Supervising Judge Jaya Madhavan began seeing more and more seniors like Linnette appear before him. He approached BronxWorks to set up an office in Bronx Housing Court specifically to help seniors after seeing how the nonprofit helped other vulnerable New Yorkers secure housing.

The program was piloted through funding from the Oak Foundation, a $5,000 grant from City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and a few additional foundation grants including from the New York Bar Foundation. But the Oak Foundation funding, which is the program's primary support, sunsets this summer. Without new funding, the program—the only one of its kind in the city—will shut down, and seniors who appear in Bronx Housing Court will lose what for many is their only advocate, as well as expert help and emotional support.

Bronx Housing Court Supervising Judge Miriam Breier recently said, “It’s important to the court that we have somewhere to refer seniors who need help. If we didn’t have the BronxWorks SHPP, we don’t know what would happen to our senior litigants.” City officials should not want to find out.

Eileen Torres is the executive director of BronxWorks, a nonprofit.