CityViews: Preventing Senior Homelessness is Worth the Money

By Eileen Torres | 5 hours ago

SHPP offers a cheaper and more humane method than shelters for making sure seniors have a place to lay their heads.

Jose Alvarez and his wife, both seniors, found themselves behind on their rent when he lost his job and she was facing health issues. Their landlord took them to housing court, seeking an eviction. Fortunately the judge recognized that their situation could be remedied, and they were referred to the BronxWorks Senior Homelessness Prevention Project (SHPP).

In the past few years, hundreds of seniors have been referred to the program by Bronx Housing Court Judges – all with good results. But, the program will close in July if we don’t secure additional funding. We hope the city government will step in to help.

SHPP helped Jose and his wife get an emergency one-time payment from the City to cover the back rent, and helped them apply for SCRIE (the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption) in order to ease their rent burden. They are just two of the over 425 seniors who since 2015 have been able to stay in their homes and out of homeless shelters thanks to SHPP.

The reason SHPP works so well is that it addresses a real need with a comprehensive solution.

In the years following the recession, former Bronx Housing Court Supervising Judge, Jaya Madhavan, recognized the needs of a growing number of seniors who were being brought to housing court by a landlord seeking an eviction. In fact, senior homelessness has been on the rise and is projected to increase 30% by 2020 – and double by 2050 – according to the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness. This situation is of particular concern in the Bronx, which has the highest eviction rate in the city.
Familiar with BronxWorks other successful housing programs, Supervising Judge Madhavan approached us to set up an office in Bronx Housing Court and help seniors referred by the court’s judges. The Oak Foundation was generous, providing BronxWorks with a grant to get SHPP off the ground with a pilot in 2011. The program was immediately successful, and expanded it following years.

SHPP takes a holistic approach, helping seniors avoid eviction in the short-term and stay in their apartment long-term. Housing specialists help seniors navigate Bronx Housing Court, secure funds to pay back rent, identify and apply for benefits for which they are eligible, and provide financial counseling so they are able to stay in their homes going forward.

Today, SHPP is the only program of its kind in our city. The need for SHPP is clear, as most seniors who appear in Bronx Housing Court lack an advocate to look out for their best interests. SHPP provides both expert help and emotional support for our seniors.

SHPP is not just the right thing to do; it is also the smart thing to do: SHPP saves our city and taxpayers significant money. The average cost per case is $1,250, saving the city $27,350 when compared to the cost of sheltering a homeless senior.

Bronx Housing Court Supervising Judge Miriam Breier, recently told us that SHPP “is essential — 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.”

We don’t want to find out what will happen to seniors without this program. Fortunately, BronxWorks has some interest in the program: City Council Member Vanessa Gibson is supportive and City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito has said SHPP funding was “on the table.”

BronxWorks appreciates the expressions of support received for SHPP thus far, and we hope that we can count on the rest of our city council members and the mayor to recognize the importance of this program and include funding in the upcoming city budget, so that we can continue to prevent senior homelessness for years to come.

_Eileen Torres is the executive director of BronxWorks._