

Children's Defense Fund

NEW YORK



NYC Needs More School Social Workers for Homeless Students

By Amy Pantoja, student, Fort Hamilton High School

If you are reading this, you more than likely are invested in learning more about the experiences of the nearly 12,308 families living in homeless shelters within New York City. My name is Amy Pantoja, and since I was a high school freshman, my family has been included in that number.

As a high school student living in a homeless shelter, I experienced firsthand what many families have to deal with. We are not able to come and go as we please, and our actions and whereabouts are constantly monitored. Although the restrictions and embarrassments of living in a shelter are difficult at times, I have highly appreciated the ongoing support of our social worker who constantly encourages our family to look forward to better days.

THRIVE NYC recently made 205 social workers available at shelters to work with families like mine. However, the initiative only plans to add 35 more. This is simply not enough to meet the needs of the families they serve. Additionally, the needs of homeless students are unique. Being a student who is homeless often puts restrictions on the quality of my school work. For instance, I do not have a computer at home to do research or homework. Having a social worker at the school who understands this and knows my teachers would have been helpful for me. While I was fortunate to have a good experience at school, I know other homeless students struggle and deserve better. This is why I support expanding the Bridging the Gap school social workers program in the New York City budget.

Our family social worker was one of the first people to instill the importance of equitable opportunities to my family. Although she is highly invested in assisting me and my family members, she has many responsibilities that limit her ability to focus on helping me with my educational needs. Last year, she tried very hard to help me acquire additional educational resources, but she could not focus entirely on this because she was also helping my parents, and many others, learn about employment and non-shelter

housing opportunities. With the support of a Bridge the Gap school social worker, I could have been afforded educational opportunities that my family social worker simply did not have the capacity to provide.

Without support from social workers focused on education, how will NYC be able to end the chain of homelessness? I do not want my future children to end up in this same circumstance, and it will take a community effort to prevent this. Education is the only way that students can get away from this lifestyle. Social workers are the essential liaisons for families like mine, and students like me, who aspire to have a healthy lifestyle while living in a shelter.

Currently, social workers in the shelters are often put in charge of more families than they can handle. That is why more funding is needed to support social workers in schools. This way, more work can be accomplished efficiently and with positive result. Social workers themselves should also be encouraged and motivated to do the best quality work they can do. Any threat to funding to support their work will be detrimental to not only their lives, but to the lives of the many young people like me who turn to their social workers for academic, professional, and emotional support. I ask that the New York City Mayor and City Council prioritize students like me by expanding the Bridging the Gap school social workers, which will improve the lives of students and families in need.

Amy Pantoja is a senior at Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, New York and a scholar with the Children's Defense Fund-New York [Beat the Odds](#)® scholarship program. The program provides social and academic college readiness programming to high school students that are working hard to overcome tremendous obstacles in their personal lives, who demonstrate academic achievement, and give back to their community. In the fall, Amy will be a first year at Cornell University.

Tell Mayor de Blasio to expand the Bridging the Gap program, and increase the number of school social workers for homeless students. You can contact the Mayor at <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/mayor-contact.page>. Select 'Budget' as the message topic. The NYC budget is expected to be finalized by the end of the week.