

TRI-STATE AREA

New York City Sued Over Program That Moves Homeless to Other Municipalities

Program provides one year's full rent up front for eligible shelter residents to move to anywhere in the U.S.



Under a New York City program to relocate the homeless, around 1,100 families in shelters have been moved to apartments in Newark, N.J., in the last two years. PHOTO: MARK KAUZLARICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Tyler Blint-Welsh

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The city of Newark, N.J., has filed a lawsuit against New York City and its mayor, Bill de Blasio, over a program that has relocated thousands of New York's homeless-shelter residents to municipalities across the country.

The suit, which was filed on Monday in a federal court in New Jersey, accuses Mr. de Blasio and New York City of coercing shelter residents to move into apartments that were illegal, had no heat or electricity and were rife with rodent and roach infestations.

Under the program, about 1,100 families in shelters have been moved to apartments in Newark in the past two years, making the New Jersey city the second-most-common relocation destination, according to New York City records. That has led to a "public nuisance in the form of increased homelessness and dilapidation" in Newark, the lawsuit says.

A spokesman for the city of Newark declined to comment but said that Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, a Democrat, plans to meet with Mr. de Blasio to discuss the situation.

Avery Cohen, a spokeswoman for Mr. de Blasio, criticized Newark's decision to sue the city.

“In the face of a regional housing crisis, the city of Newark has inexplicably taken a page from the Trump playbook, building a wall to single out and prevent families from seeking housing where they want to live,” she said. “This is wrong, hypocritical and amounts to nothing short of income-based discrimination.”

New York City's homeless population has risen sharply since Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, took office in 2014 and now totals nearly 80,000 people, according to federal data. The city's spending on the crisis has also ballooned in that span, with the administration budgeting \$3.2 billion to spend on homelessness this year.

The relocation program, known as Special One-Time Assistance, or SOTA, provides one year's full rent up front for eligible shelter residents to move to anywhere in the U.S., including to apartments in New York City.

Since the city's Department of Homeless Services started the program in 2017, more than 12,000 people, including 5,074 families, have been relocated. Nearly 1,800 families have been relocated from shelters to apartments in New York City.

The department said it costs about \$15,600 to relocate a family outside of New York state and about \$20,500 to house them in an apartment in New York City. Housing a family in a New York City shelter costs an average of more than \$40,000 a year, according to the department. Overall, the program has cost more than \$89 million since it began.

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Relocation programs for homeless individuals and families have long been in place in municipalities across the country. Former

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg used Project Reconnect, a program which buys a one-way plane, bus or train ticket for homeless individuals or families who have relatives elsewhere in the world. In 2005, San Francisco began a similar program called Homeward Bound, and

Portland, Ore., followed suit in 2016. Those programs, however, don't offer a year's worth of rent.

Giselle Routhier, policy director for the Coalition for the Homeless, said that while relocation programs aren't necessarily problematic, New York's increasing reliance on SOTA "speaks to the failure of the city to build and supply enough affordable housing."

Newark officials say in the lawsuit that they were only made aware of the program because they received a number of complaints from residents that were relocated to squalid living conditions.

The lawsuit includes an affidavit from Sha-Kira Jones, who said she had lived in a shelter in Jamaica, Queens, for 10 months with her two young children before being told she was eligible for the SOTA program in March 2018.

Department of Homeless Services officials gave her and other shelter residents a tour of New Jersey municipalities and told her that if she didn't take one of the apartments available, she might not be eligible for the program in the future, according to the affidavit. Soon after, the department helped move her family to an apartment in Newark, the affidavit says.

Within weeks, the lights stopped working in her apartment, her electric heater's knob "exploded," and the electricity kept short-circuiting, according to the affidavit.

When she sought help from the Department of Homeless Services, the agency "never answered my calls or assisted me with my living conditions," she said in the affidavit.

The Department of Homeless Services only contacted Ms. Jones after she was featured on a televised news special about the living conditions of SOTA recipients, according to the affidavit.

The Department of Homeless Services didn't respond to questions about the affidavit's allegations.