

METRO

# City needs \$500M for mandate to house homeless in hotels

By Rich Calder

April 23, 2020 | 6:20pm



A homeless person in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.  
Paul Martinka

A top de Blasio administration official Thursday estimated it would cost taxpayers half a billion dollars to house all homeless New Yorkers in private rooms to slow the [coronavirus's spread in crowded shelters](#).

The Department of Social Services told a City Council committee that proposed legislation that would mandate the change would cost \$495 million over six months, putting a dramatic new strain on the city's budget, which has been hit hard by the pandemic.

"It would pose another pressure on the [city] budget at a difficult time in terms of the city's financial footing," said Erin Drinkwater, the deputy commissioner of the Department of Social Services, as she addressed the General Welfare committee's chairman — and sponsor of the legislation, Councilman Stephen Levin (D-Brooklyn).

Levin fired back saying the city should worry more about protecting vulnerable New Yorkers than its bottom line.

"I realize we are facing a serious budget crunch," he retorted. "We should worry about that later and get people out of harm's way first."

Levin's bill is part of the sprawling legislative package of **11 bills introduced Wednesday** aimed at helping New Yorkers during the coronavirus pandemic.

It also includes plans to bolstering tenant protection, require hazard pay for essential employees and would force the city "limit or completely eliminate traffic" up to 75 miles of streets to help make social distancing easier for bikers and pedestrians.

Drinkwater said that 5,000 of the 17,000 single adults in the city's shelter system currently have their **own room in commercial hotels** and that her agency plans to move another 1,000 by the end of the month.

She also said while the city wants to move more homeless New Yorkers — especially the elderly and those living in the most crowded shelters — to private rooms, that a "mass migration" of all single adults in the system and thousands of others living on the street would not be practical.

Drinkwater pointed to steps she said the city has taken steps to drive down the spread of the virus among the homeless, including staggering meal times at shelters so that residents can following social distancing rules.

But Levin said homeless shelters are still "inherently high-risk settings" for both staffers and residents.

As of Tuesday, 570 persons in the shelter system have tested positive for the virus, including 44 who died and 85 who remain hospitalized.

Most of the rest are either now living with family, fully recovered or in DHS isolation units.

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