



Yale College
Center for International & Professional Experience

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“Homelessness and Homes”: Summer Internship and Research with the Leased Housing Department of the New York City Housing Authority

This summer, I worked for the Leased Housing Department (LHD) of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). NYCHA implements all public housing for the City of New York. Although “public housing” generally conjures images of decrepit brick towers, LHD runs the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program for NYCHA, which distributes vouchers for clients to use on the private market. In addition to vouchers for the private market, LHD uses vouchers to partner with private developers who build apartments tied to Section 8 vouchers.

My interest in public housing began with homelessness advocacy. In both my hometown, Toledo, Ohio, and New Haven, I have interacted with countless individuals staying in shelters. Shelters provide a vital service during the modern homelessness crisis, yet they do not resolve the issue of homelessness. The more work I did with homeless individuals and the more research I did on the issue, the more convinced I became that homelessness is primarily an issue of housing affordability. Working with public housing gave me the opportunity to be a part of an organization with the power to actually resolve the crisis of homelessness. In particular, the scale of the affordable housing crisis in New York allowed me to learn more about one of the most complex and difficult housing markets in the world. Each night, over 60,000 individuals stay in shelters in New York City.

I wanted to work with NYCHA this summer because, as the largest public housing authority in the country with one of the most competitive rental markets to navigate, the administration has a uniquely difficult job in ensuring that New Yorkers get housed and stay housed. I had two primary goals while working with NYCHA: (a) to explore how public housing can be implemented to address homelessness in urban areas and (b) to work in city government to better understand how city agencies can implement reform for their citizens.

Before beginning my internship, I had discussed my interest in homelessness advocacy with my employers. Since 2014, homeless individuals have received the first priority for Section 8 vouchers, so I knew that their office was invested in fighting homelessness in New York. When I arrived at the office, we considered different options for a project that would allow me to explore the relationship between homelessness and public housing while contributing to LHD’s operations. We decided my main project for the summer would be to develop and distribute a survey to formerly homeless Section 8 voucher holders, whose feedback could be used to improve LHD’s operations. Over the course of my ten weeks, I constructed the survey, distributed it to all formerly homeless voucher holders who signed a lease with their voucher during 2016, and analyzed the results. My survey focused on the individual’s reason for entering a shelter and the length of their stay, their experience working with the LHD office during the eligibility process, and the housing search process. All answers were anonymous. After collecting the data, I presented the information for the staff that conduct eligibility interviews for vouchers and discussed the results with them. I also wrote a longer report analyzing the survey results contextualized by former research concerning homelessness and public housing. In my presentation and report,

I included three concrete suggestions for the department. The most important finding was confirmation that landlords continue to discriminate against Section 8 voucher holders, despite a city law forbidding discrimination based on legal source of income. Ultimately, conducting the survey and processing its results gave me insight into the administration of Section 8 vouchers, their efficacy in resolving homelessness, and allowed me to contribute to the department's operations.

Besides learning specifically about homelessness, I wanted to experience how city government works to serve its citizens. The most surprising element of my experience with NYCHA was how much LHD felt like a business—all operations were driven by results. When the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) distributes new policies regarding voucher programs, LHD's team must work to make sure the program complies in the most efficient and effective way possible. Ideally, updates to policy should make it easier to house more people in better housing. Yet because of HUD's separation from local realities, these policies do not always fit with New York's housing market and population. For instance, one of HUD's newest initiatives is Small Area Fair Market Rents, which set Section 8 payment standards according to smaller geographical areas. Ideally, this would give Section 8 vouchers greater purchasing power. Yet in a city like New York, where gentrification spreads rapidly, the program would just give vouchers weaker purchasing power in neighborhoods where affordable housing is most threatened. While I was in the office, I analyzed new policies like this one and summarized their implications for the program among other tasks. LHD had to balance the demands of HUD with the specific context of the city and a shrinking capacity to work with a smaller staff. Although everyone worked relentlessly to make sure more people were housed, due to budget cuts they did not seem to have the resources to ensure that this work was done consistently and thoroughly. However, the department has done a truly remarkable job under the leadership of Cathy Pennington, the executive vice president that I worked under.

My second major project combined my interest in homelessness and desire to experience the abilities of city government. While discussing my survey with different members of LHD, I discovered some discrepancies in how policy was understood by those on the ground and those higher up. After mentioning this to my supervisor, she tasked me with laying out the referral, application, and lease-up processes for individuals coming from different agencies dealing with homeless individuals to NYCHA. Over the summer, I was consistently surprised by the lack of information that LHD had available. In this instance, the workflow for vital processes had never been documented fully, so the executives had no idea if the process was working efficiently and whether or not there were any redundancies. Particularly because working with homeless individuals and families requires LHD to cooperate with so many other agencies, the executives often don't have a full picture of the process outside of the specific actions required by LHD. One of the biggest insights I gained this summer was into the complexity of city government. Although LHD functions much like a business, it has many more parameters and requirements. This slows down their actions, but ensures (ideally) that government programs serve their citizens before their bureaucrats.

Without the Heinz Fellowship, I would never have experienced NYCHA's work in public housing. While at NYCHA, I experienced both the amazing dedication of public servants at the city level and the difficulties they face. I also began to understand the complexity of providing government public services. From an office on the 12th floor, it's difficult to understand the people a program serves as anything other than statistics. Yet, as my boss said to me on the first day, working in public housing is rewarding because, "At the end of the day, someone gets a home." Although I ultimately aspire to serve as a public servant, after graduating I hope to discover a way to work in the private development side of affordable housing or in legal aid for housing in order to develop a more cohesive image of the difficulties many face while finding a home in America. Thank you for your support this summer!