



VOICES

Stories from Homeless
Families in the New York City
Shelter System



**THE
LEGAL AID
SOCIETY**



JENNIFER GONZALEZ

Dear readers,

My name is Jennifer Gonzalez. I am a mother of three young children, and I would like to share my story about the PATH/DHS process.

When you first arrive at PATH, you are greeted by security guards who tell everyone who enters, “No outside food is allowed”. Though the kids are hungry, you are not allowed to bring outside food, and you can only get cold food on the lower level of the building.

My family proceeded through the metal detectors and removed all jewelry, jackets, and shoes as if we were criminals. They told me and my kids to go wait in line until we were called upon. As I was instructed, I waited patiently. I looked around to see many families in pain and misery just from being in this place. The kids looked sad, they were hungry, there were no toys; no play room, no books, nothing!

After six hours, we were interviewed, and we were able to get some food – we were starving! We weren’t allowed to leave the building to get outside food until we were told to. Once we finished the interview, we waited for another five hours to get placed in an overnight shelter. The next day, after coming back to PATH, we were placed in the Bronx on East 167th in one of the worst shelters I have ever stayed in. There were roaches and mice running around, the place was filthy and they didn’t even give my children or me sheets or pillows for the bed. My kids were crying and telling me “Mommy, why can’t we go to our old home?” I explained to them that we couldn’t because we were evicted from a non-payment petition, but they were too young to understand what was going on.

As weeks went by, we settled into this place. The case managers are supposed to be there to assist you with housing needs and government assistance, but I was not getting any assistance. More weeks passed by, and I still was not getting any help, but was told that I had to comply and meet with the worker every week or two for her to ask me the same questions.

Quick Tips for APPLYING AT PATH

I got a break and started to work for a temporary agency, and they got me a job. I was really excited because I thought I would be able to finally get out of the shelter and save up enough money to get my own place. Those dreams slowly disappeared, as I was always late or not able to come into work because it was mandatory for me to see my caseworker on a weekly basis. The case workers don't re-schedule you, and they don't give you another option. Sometimes, they log you out and make you go back to PATH/DHS and redo the same process. I strongly suggest you speak with your case manager and/or program director and keep them informed about your schedule and any issues. Please do not quit your job or lose your source of income.

Things got very bad at that shelter because they were not assisting me with anything. I have a child with epilepsy, and it was important for me to be close to my son's hospital, in case an emergency occurred. I was living in the shelter and the housing specialist, the case managers, and the supervisors all gave me excuses as to why they couldn't assist me with a medical transfer! They took my paperwork, but they didn't assist me—they told me they couldn't do anything and that I had to go back to PATH to get a transfer. I'd had enough. I reached out to The Legal Aid Society, and they were willing to hear my struggles and to assist me with a transfer. But, luckily, Legal Aid heard me, and they got me out of there and into a shelter in Manhattan that was closer to my son's doctors.

After I was placed in my new shelter, I took the appropriate steps and went to BronxWorks, where I received assistance with my City FEPS. Weeks went by again, and I was feeling under pressure. I was scared I wouldn't get approved and that no one would give me answers regarding my status. I got a call back from The Legal Aid Society, and they told me they had great news. I asked, "What is it?" The exceptional Legal Aid Attorney that had been there for me from the beginning said "You got it, Jen! You got accepted to the City FEPS Program!" I was overwhelmed! So that was great news right?

The next step to my journey, now that I had the voucher, was to obtain an apartment. So I looked on Craigslist, realtors in the area, and on search engines and began my search for an apartment.

I called and told them I saw an apartment for rent, and I would like to get an application. They asked about my income, credit and so forth. I told them I had a program, and they told me right away "Oh, I'm sorry, we don't take those" or "We don't have any apartments up for rent with a program."

I let them know it is illegal to discriminate against someone based on how they pay their rent. If this happens to you, please file a complaint with the "Human Rights Commission". They will investigate! You should take down all the necessary information, such as name, number, and address, and note the conversation, whom you spoke with, and their responses.

My journey is well ahead of me as of today I am still not able to obtain permanent housing with a voucher. As my search continues, it's hard and it takes a toll on your kids, but there is a light somewhere down the road.



ASSURANCE

Able to get through



NANDINI SAMAROO STORY:

Hi, my name is Nandini Samaroo, and I went to the PATH homeless shelter intake center five different times with my eight year old son and my baby girl that was born two weeks early. When I was applying to PATH, I had just had an emergency C section – my baby was just two weeks old at the time. She is now 4 months old, and that is how long it took for me to be found eligible. Here are some tips I have about PATH from our experience:

- You must first go through metal detectors, then you have to wait in a line to explain to a worker why you are there.
- You need to make sure and have your Client Worksheet application filled out before going in that line, because the minute you get to the desk and you don't have your application, they do not care how long the line is or how many people are there, they will send you to the back of the line.
- Make sure you bring your own pen to fill out the Client Worksheet.
- Be strong and turn in every document you have. Don't be rude to the PATH workers, because you're the one that needs help, and you don't want to be turned away.

After going through the PATH process, I was placed in so many placements that were horrible. In my first placement, the room had mice running all around and mice droppings everywhere. The room had a disgusting smell that stayed on my clothes and my children's clothes. My son and newborn baby, who was too little to even have her shots, were both exposed to all of this, and as much as I complained, nothing was ever done. The caseworkers just ignored me. I complained that I was sleeping with literally one eye open because I was scared that one of them would run by my baby's crib or climb into it or on the bed where we were sleeping. The place was so infested, and all they did was gave me sticky mouse traps. I didn't know what else to do or who to speak to - it was horrible. Every time I went to speak to the case manager, he would tell me he was tired and complained about how much work he had to get done. He never listened to what I had to say.

PATH and PERSEVERANCE

I felt like I was living at the PATH shelter intake center, because they kept giving me an overnight placement, but then I would have to repeat the process the next day and hope to get another placement. Later on, I had an ACS case due to the fact that I didn't have a steady place to live so my son wasn't going to school. My ACS caseworker and two attorneys from The Legal Aid Society helped me get through all of this. They fought for me, and they are why I'm at a stable place today. Now, I'm just waiting to take the next step and live a happy healthy life with my family. The PATH application process was one of the most stressful, most difficult, and most tiring things I have had to do, and I'm just happy and relieved it's over. I recommend following the tips above to help make the process less stressful.





PERSEVERANCE

Good luck!



C-4053
Office

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Office

MAIY SAYEDAHMED

My story begins after a long and arduous search for my own apartment turned out to be unsuccessful. My family and I were on our own in New York City, and even though we found open apartments, everything we found was completely unaffordable. My husband, my son, and I suddenly found ourselves with nowhere to sleep, so we went in to PATH to apply for emergency shelter. We were first placed in a shelter in Brooklyn, but we were found ineligible again and again. We had to reapply more than twelve times. We asked for a fair hearing after getting denied so many times. The bad thing about the shelter system is that, because PATH said we could go to an address in Florida, no one is responsible for providing you shelter during the period of time when you're waiting for your hearing. I think that's messed up. For eighteen days while I awaited the hearing, I had to sleep in a car. But we actually won the hearing! Finally, we were found eligible for shelter! We were placed in a hotel. In my opinion, a hotel shouldn't be a home for a family with a kid, yet I have been living in one since March.

We've been in this hotel for about four and a half months now, and I just recently found out that we could have begun applying for a LINC voucher to leave the shelter long ago. Although my husband was working full time, and I worked part-time, the case worker told us we didn't qualify because we both needed to have 30-35 hours per week of work. Now we learned that we could combine my husband's 40+ hours with my roughly 18 hours per week and average out to 30. It was the case worker's job to give us this information, but she did not do that, so we were left in the dark in regards to the options available to us to get started on leaving shelter and finding our own apartment.

Right now, my family is suffering because all of our money goes to buying food, since the food we are given is disgusting. The whole system is messed up. They want me to take \$186 out of my bi-weekly paycheck to give to my caseworker to save up money for an apartment, but I cannot save up that much money when it is all going towards buying proper food along with paying telephone bills and other bills.

The PATH EXPERIENCE

Additionally, we're not allowed to cook here. The only appliance that is available is a microwave downstairs in the case worker's office. However, many times the case worker isn't there when I get home from work, so I don't even have a way to heat up my food. I haven't been able to use the microwave for the past two weeks. I have tried asking the lobby attendant for help, but the case worker told us not to talk to the hotel staff. I am trying to save up as much money as I can so I can get out of shelter, but it is a long and slow process.

My advice to you is to make sure you know your rights before coming in to shelter, because no one is going to just tell you unless you find out for yourself. Many times, the case worker is not available to answer questions. You have to take it upon yourself to stay informed. If my husband hadn't met attorneys from The Legal Aid Society one day outside of PATH, I wouldn't have known that I had a legal right to a fair hearing. The lawyer I spoke to told me to go fight for a fair hearing. For me, working with Legal Aid has been awesome, because they always inform me of my legal rights and remind me to make sure these are being respected. If it wasn't for them, I would have never fought for my fair hearing. Legal Aid will advocate for you. They have been lifesavers for me and my family.

Another thing I would say is that it's important to make sure you take the right steps to get your kids their necessities and proper accommodations, such as appropriately sized bedding. When we got our hotel room, they gave my 4 year old a queen size bed, which is much too large for a small kid. It took me three months and help from Legal Aid to get them to give me a guardrail so he wouldn't hurt himself falling out of bed. Ask for any accommodation you need as soon as you enter the shelter. Otherwise it'll be a headache later on and you'll just want to give up. I also recommend taking pictures of the room as soon as you get there, and make sure the date of the picture is saved on your phone. That way you can prove that anything wrong with the room was there before you lived in it.

The case managers will try their hardest to make you hate this whole experience and just give up and leave – in their eyes, they think you have someone to go to. They make you suffer. Don't give up: hopefully at the end of this there will be something good.



Notes



NEED HELP?

Coalition for the Homeless

129 Fulton Street (Lower Manhattan)

Take the 2, 3, 4, 5, A, C, J, or Z trains to Fulton Street station. Arrive before 9 a.m. to sign up and receive assistance on a first-come, first-served basis.