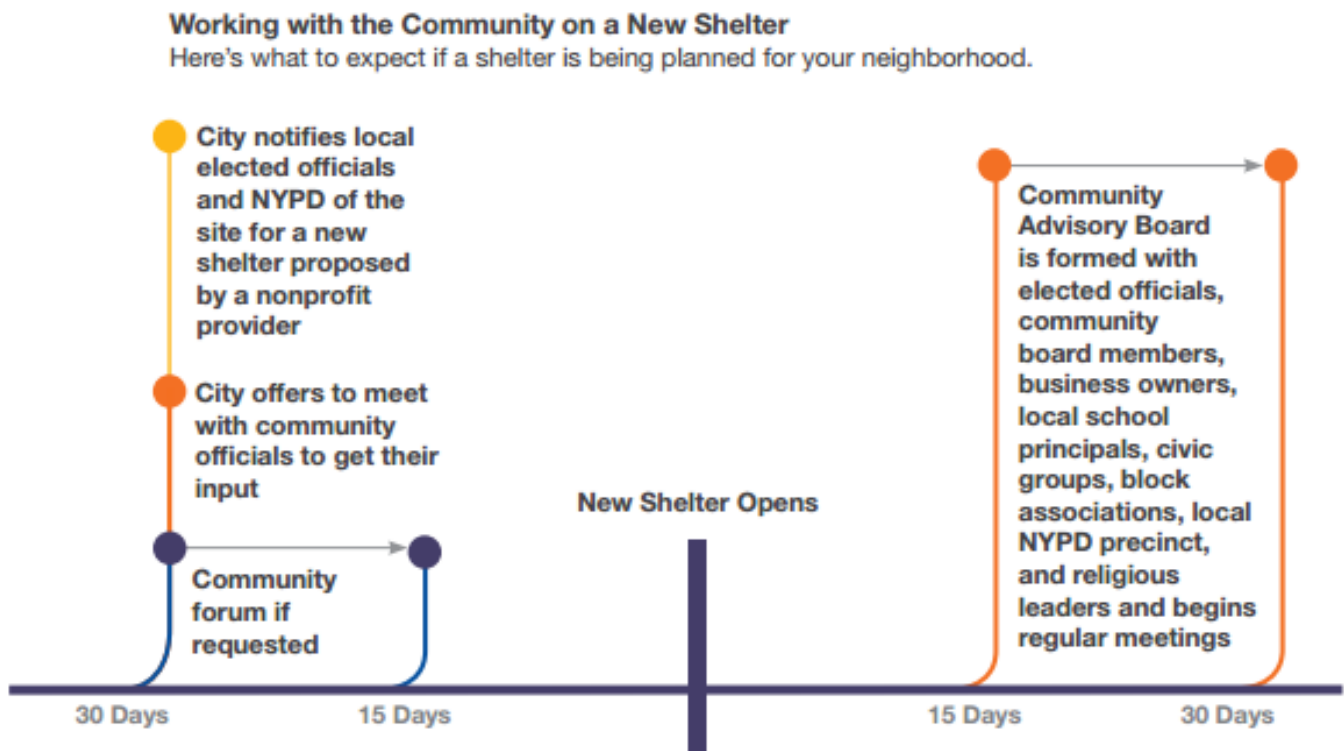


Transparency, Trust, and “Turning the Tide on Homelessness” UNHP

“Why here? Why not in your neighborhood?” These two questions were raised by a community resident opposed to the [opening of a homeless shelter for men in the Crown Heights](#) neighborhood in Brooklyn. New Yorkers are familiar with the opposition from the community when it comes to opening shelters; a new standalone shelter in Crown Heights and the use of a [commercial hotel in Maspeth, Queens](#), have both been in the headlines of late. While neither shelter is in the Bronx, the foundation of this anger is in part related to the lack of transparency from the City, questions about the equitable placement of homeless shelters, and the role of communities in the placement of shelters.

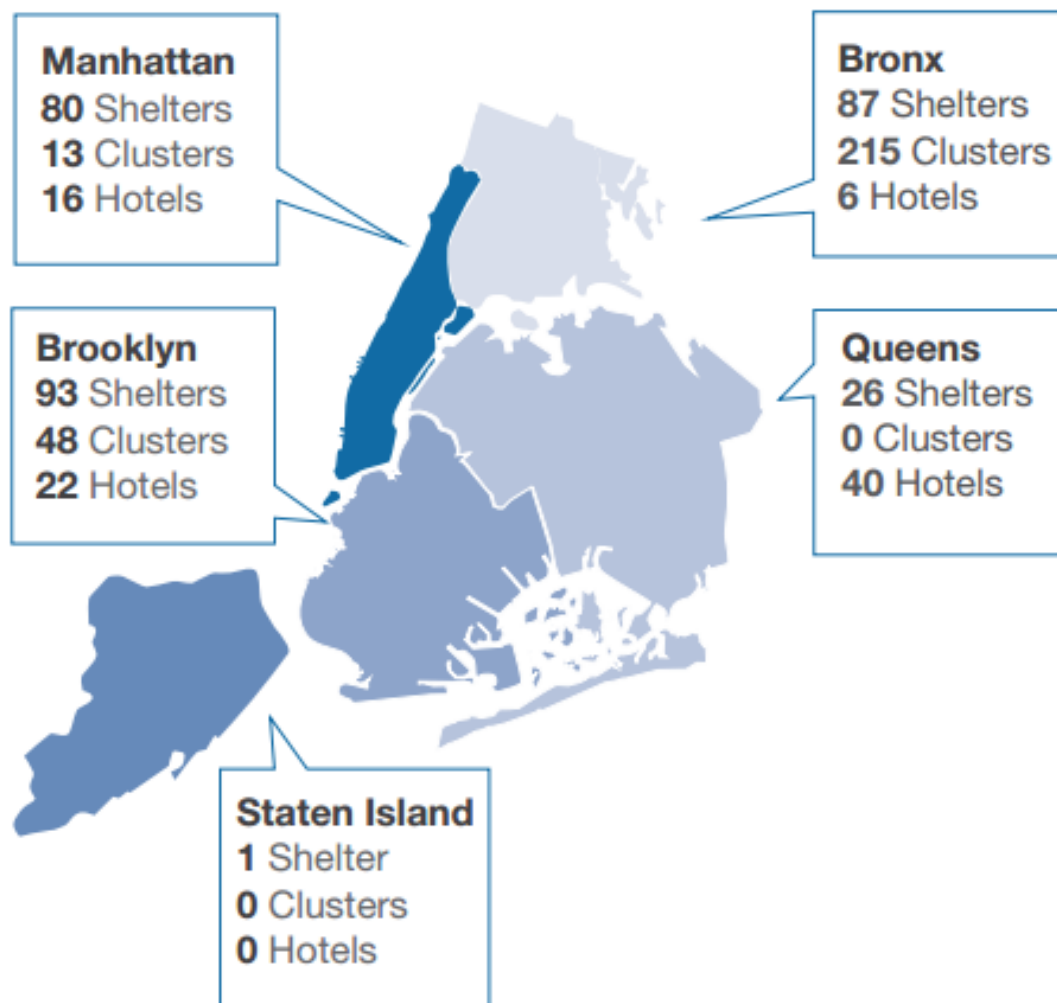
The new direction around housing the homeless outlined by Mayor Bill de Blasio in “[Turning the Tide on Homelessness](#)” seeks to reduce the homeless population of over 60,000 adults and children by four percent over the next five years. To tackle this crisis, Mayor de Blasio plans to reduce the number of shelter locations by 45 percent, keep people close to their communities and support systems, and expand prevention services. The plan calls to close 360 shelters (mostly cluster sites), expand 30 existing shelters, and open 90 new shelters. [The Bronx shelters more people in cluster sites](#) than any other borough, and most of the homeless in the Bronx are sheltered in cluster sites. Using permanent housing to temporarily house the homeless in cluster sites reduces the available affordable housing stock – as stated in our [last blog](#)- and the lack of affordable housing is in itself a driver of homelessness. Reducing the use of permanent housing for shelter would have the biggest impact on the Bronx.



This chart was included in the Mayor’s Turning the Tide report. Many complaints from communities have been about the lack of notice of shelter sitings. While the 30 day notice gives the community a chance to comment, the Mayor suggests that the feedback will not change the City’s siting plans.

Although community approval for the siting of homeless shelters is not required, the opposition in Crown Heights and Maspeth makes it clear that communities can block or

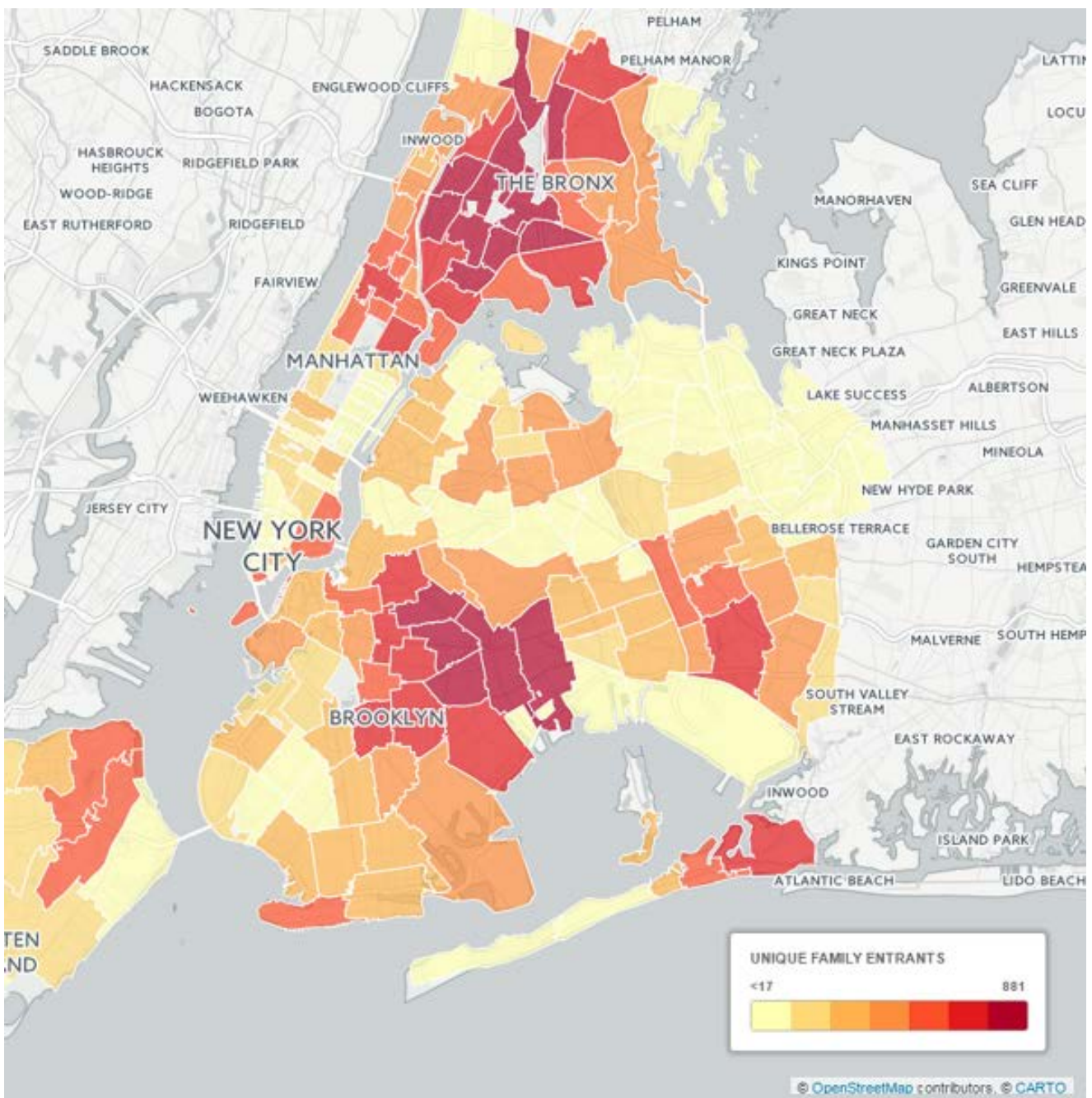
influence the plan through [other means](#). Though there was no legal notification requirement, at the onset of his administration, Mayor de Blasio committed to a seven-day notification period. [This has not always been followed](#). In both the press release and the plan there is acknowledgment of [the insufficient engagement](#) and notice around placing facilities. In the new plan, the administration recommits to a thirty-day advance notice for pending shelters. While the notice gives the community a chance to comment, the Mayor suggests that the feedback will not change the City's siting plans.



Cluster sites are often used to shelter families. The Bronx shelters the most homeless people in New York City, because it has the most cluster sites as well as a significant number of standalone shelters. 47% of shelter facilities are located in the Bronx, 25% in Brooklyn, 17% in Manhattan, 10% in Queens and 1% in Staten Island.
Graphic: Turning the Tide on Homelessness 2017

Shelters for the homeless and the number of homeless people sheltered in each borough are not equally distributed. While Brooklyn has more standalone shelters, the Bronx shelters the most homeless people. In late February the New York City Council released a [report](#) called “[Doing Our Fair Share, Getting Our Fair Share](#),” which includes new recommendations to ensure equitable siting of municipal facilities. The report urges a reformation of the Fair Share (shorthand for the 1989 Charter procedure for equitable distribution of municipal facilities) process and for the siting procedures to be observed. The 2017 [Fair Share report](#) recommendations run contrary to the Mayor’s new plan to make the shelter-siting process representative, based on where people are becoming

homeless, “so that homeless New Yorkers can be sheltered in their boroughs near their school, workplaces...and other community supports.” The Mayor’s strategy seems to be reasonable, but prompts questions: By what criteria will previous residence be determined and by whom? And how will low-income communities reabsorb more poor people? An implication of this policy will be that low-income neighborhoods will receive far more shelters than other, wealthier neighborhoods. Implementing data-driven Fair Share policies requires good data and currently there are not mechanisms in place for the public to monitor unfair placement practices or evaluate purported need and equitable distribution. Council member Brad Lander, who is [sponsoring City Council legislation](#) as part of a larger package of bills intended to fairly distribute all City services—said [in a New York Times article](#), he “appreciated the desire to help people stay in their neighborhoods, but that it should not “be a smoke screen for keeping an over-concentration in poor communities of color.”



This Crain’s map captures the zip codes where NY homeless families and individuals lived before entering the shelter system. The mayor is proposing to shelter people in their “home” neighborhoods. An implication of this policy will be that low-income neighborhoods will receive far more shelters than other, wealthier neighborhoods. Click image to open interactive link.

Data can cut both ways; good, clear data can guide planning efforts and support the claims of community residents. However insufficient or bad data can and does lead to people creating and bolstering their own unsupported narratives. Verifiable facts and figures are necessary in ensuring communities can evaluate need and distribution. In [early 2016](#), the Mayor's Office released the [Department of Homeless Services \(DHS\) Scorecard](#) in an effort to publicly report shelter conditions. This initiative furnished more data than was previously available, including shelter name, facility type, borough, and also open violations from Department of Buildings (DOB), Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), Fire Department City of New York (FDNY) and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). This data confirmed that the overwhelming majority of cluster sites are in the Bronx. It also helped to measure density, though those [figures lack clarity on the number of people in homeless families](#). While the DHS Scorecard represents a step in the right direction, overall, DHS furnishes insufficient, inconsistent, and unclear data, which makes it very difficult to glean useful insights. The available information is often truncated to prevent granular, neighborhood-level analysis and conflates data points. Furthermore, many of the datasets require a thorough understanding of agency-specific jargon and additional data to fully contextualize the information. Providing more useful data is critical for government to restore community trust and for communities to accept responsibility and believe that public policy matches what is actually being done.

Restoring community trust will take more than accurate data. The [furor in Crown Heights](#) was in part fueled by the nearby Bedford-Atlantic Armory Men's Shelter: the largest shelter for single men in the city, with capacity for 350 residents. While Crown Heights may not be in the [top ten community districts for shelter beds](#), the perception of having enough shelters in Crown Heights was shaped by the nearby shelter—[notorious for crime](#), loitering, and panhandling. In the Bronx, past promises to end the cluster site program were accompanied by an expansion of cluster site contracts with [no community notification](#). Communities have the right to know what is happening in their neighborhood and who is responsible if facilities are not well-run.

Based on our analysis here and in our [previous blog](#), we recommend the following:

Clarity on Cluster Site Transition

- The City should provide further clarity around how the cluster sites program will transition. If these apartment buildings are transitioned to permanent homeless housing or standalone shelters, there should be transparency, and the nature of the transition should be taken into consideration when siting other facilities.

Rent Regulatory Oversight

- In a tight affordable housing market rent regulations must be strictly monitored and enforced. For the transitional cluster sites, there should be clear guidelines for landlords regarding the rent-paying tenants and regulatory obligations going forward. There should be additional City and State oversight over these units to preserve permanent affordable housing.

Share City Shelter and Homeless Housing Data Openly and Consistently

- DHS and City Planning should publish detailed granular public data on a consistent basis on the City's Open Data Platform or municipal website. Data should be available at the community district- or neighborhood-level for all DHS facilities and cluster transitions. A narrative or synopsis of how these sites will be phased out would serve as a complement to the data. The furnished datasets need to be simple to analyze, available in accessible file formats, and attached to detailed data dictionaries with criteria explanations.

Consider the Needs of the Community

- There must be respect for school attendance, work commutes, and family ties when making decisions around homeless shelter and affordable housing placement, but the overall impact on communities also needs to be taken into consideration. There should be additional conversation around the sustainability of the Mayor's neighborhood-based plan, especially as it relates to low-income communities in the Bronx. Extra consideration should be given to the intersections between the approach to homelessness and infrastructure, services, and concentrated poverty.

The disappearance of affordable housing is a major factor in the growing numbers of homeless in New York. The need to create and preserve affordable housing has to be met while addressing the rising number of homeless individuals and families. To do that, the City has to overcome a lack of trust that has developed over a long period of time. Sharing accurate, accessible, and clear data is an important step. Engaging the community in the planning process is equally important. And that engagement needs to start before the all-but-final siting decisions have been made. Perhaps the question, "Why here?" will always be asked, but real community involvement and good data may be the basis of an acceptable answer.