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NYC subway safety plan targeting the homeless shows hints of promise but significant problems



Lazaro Sanchez poses for a portrait in his room in a permanent supportive housing facility run by The Volunteers of America and supported with government funding at 1150 Commonwealth Ave. Thursday, Feb. 22, 2024 in the Bronx, New York. (Barry Williams for New York Daily News)

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Lazaro Sanchez was [living on the A train](#) when an [outreach worker](#) in an orange jacket offered him a chance.

After a slow, steady slide into homelessness, Sanchez had spent around five years sleeping on the subway. [His story is not unlike thousands of other New Yorkers](#): A bumpy start as an immigrant, a series of jobs that [didn't pay enough](#) and, ultimately, hitting rock bottom as a man living in the dark underbelly of the city.

Then, last winter, the encounter with a city outreach worker led him to a shelter, and from there, to his now home — a dorm-style room in a [Bronx apartment building](#) that's part of a [city effort to get people living on the subways into better situations](#).

Sanchez is a success story. But a rare one.

The city's efforts to [improve subway safety](#) by moving the homeless into more stable housing have shown some signs of promise, but have yet to make significant inroads among the [thousands of New Yorkers](#) who sleep on the trains, according to data reviewed by the Daily News.



AP Photo/Richard Drew, File

A man sleeps on subway train seats in New York on April 14, 2021. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

One city team, beefed up as part of Mayor Adams' 2022 "[Subway Safety Plan](#)," made contact about 24,000 times with homeless New Yorkers over nine months in 2023. Over 80% of the time, their help was rebuffed, data obtained by The News shows.

The effort, a key part of initiatives aimed at cutting crime, faces [daunting challenges, and is at risk of](#) being bogged down by an array of difficulties. They include the city's housing shortage, complex psychiatric and medical [needs of the homeless population](#), bureaucratic holdups for food stamps and housing vouchers, fiscal needs and staffing constraints, plus a widespread lack of trust in the city among homeless people.

“Of course, we’re elated any time any single person is able to be connected to permanent housing, that’s wonderful,” said Dave Giffen, executive director at Coalition for the Homeless. “But when you look at the scope of the problem ... that’s a drop in the bucket. There are thousands of people who need housing, thousands of people sleeping in the subway.”



John Minchillo/AP

Homeless Outreach personnel engage with a person sleeping on a bench in the Manhattan subway system as commuters pass through the underground tunnels, Feb. 21, 2022. (John Minchillo/AP)

[Homelessness](#) and housing insecurity have reached [increasingly grim milestones](#) in recent months, and subway safety has become a major talking point for the city as Gov. Hochul deployed 1,000 [members of the National Guard](#) and state troopers to the transit system this past week.

Adams announced the Subway Safety Plan to much fanfare — and criticism — in February 2022, when a series of high-profile violent incidents unnerved straphangers as the city shook itself awake from the pandemic. The plan is aimed at [ending homelessness on the subways](#) through enforcement and outreach.

Through this program, [the city says it can make a dent in the street homeless population](#). In the two years the plan has been in place, 397 people previously living on the trains have been [moved into permanent housing](#) as of March 7, according to Department of Social Services data shared exclusively with the Daily News.

"I absolutely think this is a reflection of organized city strategy and something that we in fact are building on," [DSS Commissioner Molly Wasow Park](#) told The News.

The path to homelessness

Sanchez, 75, came to New York City in 1980 after [fleeing communist Cuba](#). He found a room for rent in Corona, Queens, and made a living selling fruit on the streets.

He [struggled to make ends meet](#) a bit, working jobs at supermarkets and a long stint at a dry cleaner. There were ups — when he moved with his family to their own apartment in upper Manhattan, and — and downs — when his wife died, in 2001, his two daughters were out on their own and he had nowhere to go.

"I don't got money to pay rent by myself, because it's tough," Sanchez said. "Sometimes you got good times, sometimes you got bad times. That's part of life."



Lazaro Sanchez's poses for a portrait in his room in a permanent supportive housing facility run by The Volunteers of America and supported with government funding at 1150 Commonwealth Ave. Thursday, Feb. 22, 2024 in The Bronx, New York. Sanchez is a former homeless resident of New York City. (Barry Williams for New York Daily News)

The next few years were even more unsettled — he moved from a basement apartment, to a [friend's living room](#), to another friend's apartment, with a bout of homelessness in between. Sanchez fell into homelessness in earnest around 2016, when a friend who let him stay in her apartment abruptly moved out of New York. With that, he lost the last stable place he had to stay.

"So then I went to the subway," he said. He'd ride the A all night, from 207th St. to Far Rockaway.

He was [street homeless](#) for around five years. During that time, "everything happened," he said. Sanchez recalls the time he woke up on the train only to realize someone had taken his phone, a lifeline for him. He says he felt horrified when he once fell asleep on a park bench and woke up with a stranger sexually assaulting him.

He worked odd jobs and had Social Security checks coming in, so sometimes Sanchez — who's a bit obsessive about cleanliness — would pay \$125 for a night at a motel, where he could shower and get a good sleep. He prided himself on not appearing homeless.

"This was the worst [time] of my life," he said.



Gardiner Anderson/for New York Daily News

A person believed to be homeless sleeps on a train at the Coney Island – Stillwell Avenue subway station in Brooklyn, New York. (Gardiner Anderson/for New York Daily News)

Feelings of shame, being disrespected and poorly treated only intensified in his few interactions with the homeless shelter system, where he says drug use, theft, fights and unsanitary conditions [quickly drove him away](#).

He lied to his two daughters, telling them he was living out in Far Rockaway. He didn't want them to know he was homeless — it's not like they had the space or money to help him, anyway.

A new approach

Late one night, as Sanchez sat at the last stop of the A train at 207th St. in Inwood, an outreach worker wearing a bright orange jacket approached him. She was kind to him, looking him in the eye as she spoke to him.

That “nice lady,” he calls her, was part of an end-of-line team made up of homeless outreach and mental health workers, accompanied by cops and psychiatrists, who patrol the subways, [walking from car to car to offer help](#) to people sitting in the corners of stations or slumped on train cars.

After a few in-between stops, Sanchez moved into an apartment that has helped him turn things around. He entered a pilot program through the Volunteers of America-Greater New York and [signed a lease for a supportive apartment](#) in a city-owned building in November with the help of a CityFHEPS voucher.

"I liked the way they treated me, from the start," Sanchez said of his building and its staff. "You see the respect. She shook my hand."

He's now living on a quiet, residential block in Soundview, in the Bronx. He's building a sneaker collection in his college-dorm-style room, and he watches TV in the common rooms, experimenting with new recipes he sees on the Food Channel in a shared kitchen.



Lazaro Sanchez's room is pictured in a permanent supportive housing facility run by The Volunteers of America and supported with government funding at 1150 Commonwealth Ave. Thursday, Feb. 22, 2024 in the Bronx. (Barry Williams for New York Daily News)

The program can kick off a fairy-godmothering process for some of New York's most in-need residents, the city says. Through a pipeline of outreach workers, case management staff and social workers, they can obtain the medical help or social services they need, plus government vouchers and ultimately a place to live, either in [supportive housing](#) or in apartments of their own.

The manpower — and cost — is not insignificant.

The [chronically homeless](#) generally have disabilities, mental illness or substance-use disorders. It's a tough job to get them from living on the trains to permanent, stable housing. Much of the work, the city says, relies on repeat interactions, sometimes dozens or hundreds, and relationships built between outreach workers and homeless people.

"People who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness, particularly in New York City, where we do have a robust shelter system, have been failed by everybody, by every level of society, every level of government, and we do think that trust is a really important part of the equation," Park said.

The city invested \$171 million in the program in fiscal year 2023, [an "unprecedented" investment](#) that enabled them to open more low-barrier beds — a more flexible shelter option geared towards the street homeless — and hire more outreach workers. This investment has created a major impact, the city says: Nearly 400 people have been able to find permanent, subsidized housing since the plan began.

But coming up with an effective model is one thing. Scaling it is another.

And the city is now facing a critical question: Can these efforts reach deeper into the universe of those New Yorkers living on the streets and subways?

Small-scale solutions

The numbers reviewed by The News suggest the city has yet to make their efforts work on a large scale.

Most encounters with homeless New Yorkers do not end up with them accepting help [offered by outreach teams](#), new data detailing the actions of four interagency teams under the Subway Safety Plan shows. The vast majority of homeless people's interactions with outreach teams don't result in transport to shelter, according to NYPD data obtained via a Freedom of Information Law request by the Urban Justice Center's Safety Net Project and shared with The News.

From January through September 2023, for example, officers with one of those teams, the city's "End-of-Line" outreach group, recorded that just 15%, or around 3,700, of over 24,000 interactions with homeless New Yorkers, resulted in transport to a shelter. About 82%, or around 20,000, of the encounters, which don't count individual people, resulted in a refusal.

Another team, the Joint Response Team, under the Subway Safety Plan reported 139 shelter acceptances, but 7,905 refusals during the same time frame.



Barry Williams/for New York Daily News

A homeless person pulls a cart at the Court Square subway station by the G train in Long Island City, Queens. (Barry Williams for New York Daily News)

Since the plan began in February 2022, DSS reports nearly 6,900 people have checked into shelter beds throughout the Subway Safety Plan, although that number that [does not count how long a person stays at the shelter](#).

The data “demonstrates the inadequacy of services” the city offers, said Natalie Druce, staff attorney at the Safety Net Project.

The End-of-Line teams also “ejected” or removed 12,655 people from the transit system during the first nine months of 2023. The number doesn't specify how many of them are homeless, but Druce said she believes many of them were. Overall, the data shows that NYPD officers accompanying the four interagency teams inspected nearly 30,000 trains, made over 15,000 ejections, made 72 arrests and issued 1,767 summonses in January through September of 2023.

Advocates say the data is proof that [police enforcement activities](#) overshadow outreach.

“There is zero evidence to suggest that ejecting homeless people from the subway system when they have nowhere else to go will help them secure permanent housing,” Druce said. “In fact, the opposite is true. Treating homeless outreach as a police function leads to a breakdown in any possibility for trust, further criminalization of homelessness and causes serious harm by exposing them to hazardous weather conditions.”

Eduardo Ventura, 38, has been homeless for over 20 years. He’s slept on the trains and streets for much of that time. He badly wants an apartment of his own, but he doesn’t see a path towards that.

“What’s the point of a shelter, they don’t help you in nothing,” Ventura said. “They don’t help you, they don’t get you forward. They don’t help your mental problem, they don’t got Medicaid.”

Ventura said the city hasn’t been able to help him get ID or a voucher. He said that when he has refused help from outreach workers, police have removed him from the station.

“I’ve talked to older people than me, younger people than me, and we’re all in the same boat,” he said. “We haven’t seen no difference in years, generations.”

Daunting challenges

The city’s efforts in the subways are unfolding against a troubling backdrop: The overall picture of street homelessness is dire — and [may be getting worse](#).

The scale of the problem is huge: There are more than 120,000 people [currently residing in the city’s shelter system](#). Thousands more sleep on the streets and subways. That population has been boosted by the [influx of migrants](#) coming to New York City.

Most are still falling through the cracks, said Giffen, of the Coalition for the Homeless. His team has not seen much improvement since the implementation of the plan two years ago, and Giffen said his clients are still unable to get the services they need as delays still plague the system.

The varied and complex needs of the city's homeless population present another layer of difficulty. Around two-thirds of the city's street homeless population have a mental illness, and one-third have some kind of physical disability, according to a 2021 [report by the Coalition for the Homeless](#). Moreover, some don't know how to read, or they lack basics like IDs or bank accounts.

To get them to shelter, city workers have to help them overcome the myriad reasons why people avoid the homeless shelter system. Prior traumatic experiences in shelters, violence, poor living conditions, placements in unfamiliar parts of the city, strict rules imposed by shelters and fears of getting robbed are just a few.



A person asks for money with a sign in a subway station in New York. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

In speed-tracking them to housing, city employees along the way need to devote extra time and attention to getting them this help.

"Not everybody's ready," Carmen Charlton, the program director of Sanchez's supportive housing site, said. "Not everybody's not ready for housing."

New York is also in the midst of a housing crisis. Vacancy rates have dropped to the [lowest in decades](#), and the need for housing, especially affordable housing, far outpaces the number of new apartments being constructed.

Finally, the program is labor intensive and, therefore, expensive. Hitting the achievements outlined by Park cost the city a hefty \$171 million price tag in fiscal year 2023. The city is in the midst of a budget cycle marked by shifting announcements, [slashed Sunday service](#) at public libraries and the prospect of budget cuts in the public schools. It's unclear how deep the city's pockets go in funding these efforts.

"It may not look like a large number of successes," Charlton said. "But it is successful, and I hope that it continues to grow."

Sanchez is glad the program is in place. For years, as he lived moving from place to place, he dreamed of a space of his own where he could store his things and relax and listen to music. He's now proud to have people visit him, and he likes to trade cleaning tips with his neighbor.

His favorite thing about his place?

"It's clean. That's what I like."

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