

Testimony of K.N.,

client of The Legal Aid Society,

on

the City Shelter System, Advantage NY, and HomeBase

presented before

The New York City Council

April 15, 2010

Good afternoon. I am a survivor of domestic violence and a participant in the Advantage program. I do not want to use my real name because I do not want my batterer to find me but you can call me K.N. I became disabled in 2006 when I injured my back while working as a home health aide. I have been unable to work since and have difficulty doing basic daily tasks. I also suffer from high blood pressure and chronic back pain.

For the last two years I have lived in an Advantage apartment with my daughter, two nieces and two nephews. I became homeless in 2007. I had to move out of my apartment at that time in order to take custody of my nieces and nephews. The City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) had removed them from the custody of their mother, my sister, after my six-year-old niece was left at home alone with her siblings and

accidentally started a fire in the home by putting a blanket over a space heater to keep warm because she was cold.

After contacting every family member who I thought could take the children in because my apartment was too small, everyone said no, they could not take them in. My sister asked me if I would care for the children until she got herself together. Because I did not want my nieces and nephews to go into foster care, I decided to take them into my home.

However, after three months, ACS said that my apartment was too small, and that if I wanted to keep my nieces and nephews, I would have to leave my apartment and enter a homeless shelter. Of course, I did not want to leave my own apartment, where I had lived with my daughter for four years, and go into a shelter, but I knew that my nieces and nephews had no one else who would take care of them and I was not willing to let them go into

foster care. All four of them have special needs and they were clearly traumatized by years of abuse. For the children to be the ages they were- 15, 14, 12 and 6, they did not have the basic skills that a child of ages 1 to 5 has. I felt like after all they had been through, I could not just abandon them or trust that they would be taken care of in foster care. So, I did what ACS said, left my own apartment, and entered a homeless shelter in March 2007.

After a few months of living with me, my nieces and nephews trusted me enough to tell me that my nieces had been sexually abused by their mother's boyfriend. I contacted ACS and the police and the boyfriend was put in jail. The children's mother was charged with abuse and neglect in both Family Court and Criminal Court. She is on parole and has supervised visits with her children once a week.

My family and I resided in a homeless shelter from March 2007 to January 2008. This was one of the worst experiences of my and the children's lives. I pray never to have to go back into shelter. The shelter where we were placed was a one bedroom - even smaller than my own apartment from which ACS has told us to leave - with horrible conditions. The apartment was infested with roaches and rats. The windows could not be left open because rats would come in through the open windows. When we would come home at night we would find rats on our bed. On the first day we got there, the super showed me how it was possible to break open my front door using a credit card. We were robbed seven times during our stay there. When I complained to the management company I was told that I had to learn to take the good with the bad. I decided I would take the good. During the time that I was in shelter, I was certified for the Children Advantage program, and told to find an apartment for \$1316 for my family

of six. It was not easy, but we found a place to live. We moved into our own apartment on Staten Island in January 2008.

My shelter worker told me that the Advantage program would pay my rent for one year and during that time I would be certified for Section 8.

However, within the year, I had not received anything from Section 8. I

went in person to the Section 8 office with my case worker from New York

Foundling Hospital to check on the status of my application. When I got

there, I was told that I had been denied Section 8 because my daughter

had been arrested for a fight when she was in high school. I did not

understand why this would have any affect on my Section 8 application

because she was a minor at the time and all charges against her had been

dropped. I never received any written notification that I had been denied

Section 8 and would never have known if I hadn't gone in person. I was

told that I would have to fill out a new Section 8 application and would have to start the process over again. The Section 8 worker told me send in a new application, which I did immediately. However, I never received any response on my new Section 8 application either.

The Advantage program continued to pay my rent for a second year. After two years in my apartment I expected to receive a Section 8 voucher but I still have not been certified for Section 8 to date. I contacted 311 to complain about Section 8 and was given a complaint number. I was contacted a few days later by DHS and was told that I would be receiving a letter in the mail telling me that my Advantage subsidy would be extended. To date I never received any letter. My Advantage voucher expired in December 2009 and my landlord told me that he was raising the rent to \$1500. Since my Advantage voucher expired four months ago, I have had

no way to pay the rent. My family's only income is my disability money and my nephew's SSI - the total of which is only slightly higher than our monthly rent. Since I have taken my nieces and nephews into my home, I have been struggling to financially support them. For the first time in my life I took out credit cards to pay my bills and buy food, since the food stamps that I get are not enough to last to the end of the month.. Now I am in debt. My landlord recently served me with a notice saying that I have to move out by April 15, 2010 or he will evict me. He also told me that he sold the house to someone else and that the new owner would be moving into my apartment and I have to leave. He said if I just leave I will not owe him anything. He told me this after I asked him to give me a legal notice of eviction.

I was told that I should go to a HomeBase office in my neighborhood to see if they could help me. However, when someone from my church and I contacted them to explain my situation, they said that there was a list that had everyone who was waiting for a Section 8 voucher. They said that because my name was not on the list, I would not receive an extension on my rental subsidy. They told me to try Project Hospitality, and to look for a two-bedroom apartment. They said they could only help me if I was able to pay the rent going forward and even if I applied for a one-shot deal they would require the same thing. Other than that there was nothing they could do to help me.

Because of her conviction, my sister is not going to be able to get custody of my nieces and nephews again, at least not any time soon. Last

weekend, she suffered a heart attack at age 39 and a shunt was placed in her heart. She and I have discussed me adopting the children.

I am absolutely terrified that my family and I will be evicted and will have to go to shelter. I am constantly stressed thinking about how I will pay my rent and keep my family in their home. I am trying to keep my blood pressure from rising again. Over the last year I have been hospitalized four times because of my blood pressure and chronic back pain. However, I know I have to stay healthy and positive because I am the only person that my nieces and nephews can rely on. I cannot even think about making my nieces and nephews, who have already been through so much trauma, go back to shelter. I plan to continue to support and fight for these children but I cannot do it alone. The Advantage and HomeBase programs do not have any answers for me, and I am wondering what we can do next.

I am asking you to please help me to help them. I need an apartment or house that will accommodate my family. Please help us, no one should have to live in a shelter that is not fit to live in. The shelters of New York need so much improvement, and someone who really cares about the needs of people who are in need. I was given a vision years ago of a place called K.N.'s Haven House, which is a place of safety. I believe that God gave these children to me to keep them safe and that is what I am going to do. I love my nieces and nephews and I want the best for them- they deserve it. So please help us, and anyone else who has been put in the same situation that we have,

Thank you and God bless you.