

The logo for the New York City Bar, featuring the text "NEW YORK CITY BAR" in a serif font, flanked by two horizontal white bars.

NEW YORK  
CITY BAR

The logo for the City Bar Justice Center, featuring the text "CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER" in a serif font, flanked by two horizontal white bars.

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# **#WIFI4HOMELESS: A MOVEMENT TO CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

*Ensuring Internet Access for New  
Yorkers Experiencing Homelessness*

**AUGUST 2021**

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, the City Bar Justice Center's Legal Clinic for the Homeless released a report, Homeless Need Internet Access to Find a Home, documenting the impact of New York City's stark digital divide on families in homeless shelters. The report found that only 6% of those surveyed were able to access the internet through their homeless shelter, 67% wanted but had no regular access to Wi-Fi, and 75% agreed that internet access would help improve their living circumstances. Further, survey respondents noted that if they had access to the internet while in the homeless shelter, they would use the internet for the following purposes: finding permanent housing, finding a job, accessing other benefits such as unemployment, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, seeking medical care, doing schoolwork, and basic communications such as accessing email and social networking. The report shed light on the devastating consequences of lack of access to essential technology for families and individuals in homeless shelters – an issue that raised serious concerns when COVID-19 swept through New York City.

## LAUNCHING THE #WIFI4HOMELESS ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN

While issued during the early months of the pandemic, much of the findings of the report were based on pre-pandemic conditions. The outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown worsened deep-rooted inequities that exist for New Yorkers who experience food, housing, and economic insecurity, and lack access to basics like reliable internet. Critical services and resources typically accessed in person by individuals and families residing in homeless shelters moved online exclusively during the COVID-19 crisis, leaving those who lacked access to reliable Wi-Fi and internet-ready devices effectively cut off.

Following its issuance, the report and its recommendations were endorsed by over 30 organizations, and prompted the New York City Bar Association (City Bar), led by its **Social Welfare Law Committee** and **Education and the Law Committee**, to become engaged in advocacy around the issue of technology access in homeless shelters.

In August 2020, the City Bar's President, Sheila S. Boston, sent **a letter** to the de Blasio Administration urging it to prioritize New York City Department of Social Services (DSS)-funded properties (including all properties and temporary housing facilities, including hotels, that are maintained by DSS and its two administrative units, the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and Department of Homeless Services (DHS)) as part of its citywide "**Internet Master Plan**." At the time, the Plan - which aimed to increase the availability of Internet throughout the five boroughs - was not directed toward people experiencing homelessness, and did not include a single reference to DSS shelters or the unique access needs of the City's shelter residents.

In an effort to amplify the issues outlined in the letter and the May 2020 report, the City Bar and City Bar Justice Center (CBJC) launched the **#Wifi4Homeless advocacy campaign**, which is currently ongoing. The campaign seeks to raise awareness about how lack of access to essential technology is disproportionately impacting individuals and families residing in homeless shelters. Further, the advocacy campaign calls for the City to provide access to the following

in every shelter: (1) reliable Wi-Fi connections, (2) updated internet-ready computers, tablets or other devices, and (3) wireless or Bluetooth printers, or printers that maintain connections with the homeless shelter's computers, tablets or other word processing devices. The campaign aims to achieve those goals by (1) providing members of the public, related stakeholders and elected officials with necessary educational resources, (2) leading a robust social media campaign to raise awareness on the issue, and (3) conducting direct advocacy. This is all done in collaboration with partner organizations also working on this issue.

As part of the campaign's direct advocacy, the City Bar's Social Welfare Law Committee and Education and the Law Committee provided **testimony** in October 2020 at a New York City Council hearing regarding "Broadband and the Digital Divide." The testimony highlighted the impact of the digital divide on New York City's homeless population and urged the City Council to help address this issue by working with the Mayor's Office and all related agencies to ensure that City-funded homeless shelters are prioritized in any plans to expand broadband and internet access.



## MAKING AN IMPACT IN NEW YORK CITY AND BEYOND

Following the hearing and months of work through the #Wifi4Homeless campaign, the Mayor's Office **announced** it would be providing Wi-Fi access in family and domestic violence shelters to help ameliorate connectivity issues that impacted remote learning for school-aged children. While a good first step, the plan did not include the installation of Wi-Fi in adult shelters, youth shelters or other temporary housing facilities (such as hotels). As further details emerged about the plan, it also became clear that the timeline for the project was unacceptable, leaving many shelters without Wi-Fi through the remainder of the school year.

In response, City Bar President Sheila Boston joined with New York City Council Member Mark Treyger (Chair of the Council's Education Committee), to pen a January 2021 **letter** to then-City Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza urging further action to address the lack of internet access and needed technology for students in homeless

shelters participating in remote learning. The letter also highlighted the need for Wi-Fi in all shelters, which would enable residents to engage in GED, vocational, and college course work.

While the City Bar continued to advocate for internet access in all City-funded shelters and hotels, the Legal Aid Society and Milbank LLP filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of the Coalition for the Homeless and individual shelter residents to compel the City to speed up its installation of Wi-Fi in shelters where school-age children reside to enable them to attend school remotely. By April 2021, the City had installed wireless internet in 75% of these shelters and reached a **settlement** that required the City to ensure installation in more than 200 homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters by the end of the summer and also provide interim solutions for students waiting for Wi-Fi installation.

In recent months, the #Wifi4Homeless campaign has expanded the scope of its efforts beyond New York City. The City Bar **supports** a bill introduced in the New York State Legislature by Senator Alessandra Biaggi and Assembly Member Andrew Hevesi (**A.3912-A/S.3593-A**).

that would require local social service districts to provide internet access for all individuals residing in temporary housing, with the cost covered by the State. Under the bill, temporary housing would include, but not be limited to, family shelters, shelters for adults, domestic violence shelters, runaway and homeless youth shelters, or safe houses for refugees. This bill would represent a huge step towards closing the digital divide by ensuring that all shelter residents across New York State are finally guaranteed reliable internet access. While the bill did not pass either house before the end of the legislative session, the City Bar plans to work during the coming months with the bill's sponsors and its partners in advocating for its enactment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the City Bar Justice Center's May 2020 report, and the subsequent #Wifi4Homeless campaign, helped fuel a movement aimed at ensuring all shelter residents across New York State are finally guaranteed reliable internet access.

With the support of City Bar staff, community partners, and pro bono supporters, the #Wifi4Homeless advocacy campaign successfully captured the attention of key stakeholders and served as the basis for proposed State legislation. While there is still much work left to be done, the victories of the past year are important steps towards the ultimate goals of closing the digital divide and securing reliable internet access for all homeless shelter residents in New York.

