



December 18, 2024

Hon. Kathy Hochul  
Governor of New York State  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Hon. Kristen Gonzalez  
New York State Senate  
Legislative Office Building 817  
Albany, NY 12247

Hon. Karines Reyes  
New York State Assembly  
Legislative Office Building 327  
Albany, NY 12248

**Re: Support for A.5649-A (AM Reyes) / S.4561-A (Sen. Gonzalez)  
Providing Internet Access in Temporary Housing Facilities**

Dear Governor Hochul, Senator Gonzalez, and Assemblywoman Reyes:

The National Homelessness Law Center (“NHLC”) supports the enactment of #WiFi4Homeless, A.5649-A (AM Reyes) / S.4561-A (Sen. Gonzalez), which will provide internet / WiFi access to all individuals residing in temporary housing throughout New York State. NHLC is a national capacity-building organization with 35 years of legal and policy expertise around the criminalization of homelessness and related housing justice priorities at the local, state, and national levels. My work as a lawyer and advocate on behalf of the NHLC is based in New York, with an eye on the advancement of housing as a human right. In alliance with [over 60 legal nonprofit organizations and community-based groups across the state](#), we urge that this bill be passed as either a standalone bill or incorporated into the FY26 New York State Budget to help address the state’s homelessness crisis.

Access to digital technology has become critical in sustaining all aspects of our modern life, and this is no less true for people living in homeless shelters. Guaranteed access to reliable high-speed internet is one of the easiest, most cost-effective things we can do to increase opportunities for some of the most marginalized members of our society. Without reliable and consistent internet access, shelter residents cannot search and apply for permanent housing or employment,

participate in remote classroom learning and related school or work commitments, apply for government benefits (i.e., food stamps, Cash Assistance, Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, etc.) for which they are eligible, foster cohesion with friends and family, improve and strengthen language access, obtain necessary medical care, access critical legal services, or access basic entertainment and social networking opportunities.

The absence of reliable internet in shelters also forces shelter residents to consider monthly cellular data plans when they lack sufficient financial resources or utilize free public WiFi, (e.g., in public spaces, libraries, or small businesses) that is often time limited. Self-paid cellular plans often include limits on minutes or data and may not work in shelters with bad cell service. Public WiFi does not provide the data protection or privacy needed to conduct sensitive personal business, and in the case of local establishments, often require the additional purchase of a food or beverage item to access altogether. Accordingly, these are wholly insufficient, impracticable alternatives.

While the evidence-based, long-term solution to addressing homelessness has proven to be affordable, quality housing, a bill measure like A. 5649-A/S.4561-A offers short-term solutions and a model for other state and local jurisdictions to follow suit. Technology justice is both a racial justice and a human rights issue. As of June 2024, according to data publicly shared by the Office of the City Comptroller, 99.6% of households and/or families in temporary Department of Homeless Services (“DHS”)–funded shelters self-identified as Black, Hispanic, Native American, and/or Asian by way of race and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> Our global Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”)—particularly Target Goal 9—demand progress to address inequalities in digital and innovation sectors by the year 2030. In its May 2024 report on the progress of achieving these goals, the United Nations’ General Assembly and Social Council reported that mobile broadband services are accessible to 95% of the world’s population.<sup>2</sup> The Council further concluded that digital connectivity, among key transitions relating to energy and food policy, must be a priority if we want to reduce inequalities, expand social protections, and achieve transformative progress.<sup>3</sup> As New York shelter residents constitute the estimated 5% of the world’s population for whom these essential services are inaccessible, it is especially incumbent upon our state leaders to promote non-discriminatory digital inclusion to them in this legislative capacity. A 2023 report reissued by the New York City Bar underscores the disparities in providing WiFi access to New York City family and domestic violence shelters at the exclusion of adult shelters, youth shelters, and other temporary housing facilities across the city and state.<sup>4</sup> Equalizing the playing field in this capacity is not only meant to bridge the digital divide for your constituents but to ensure that *all* New Yorkers have the right to enjoy the highest standard of physical, mental, and emotional health.

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<sup>1</sup> “Charting Homelessness in NYC,” Off. N.Y.C. Comptroller (2024), <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/services/for-the-public/charting-homelessness-in-nyc/shelter-population/race-ethnicity/>. Please note that these data figures appear to be non-dispositive and limited to a shelter population of adult families and families with children. However, we found it important to include in highlighting the overwhelmingly high collective shelter counts of BIPOC-identifying residents as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> U.N. Gen. Ass. Econ. & Soc. Council, Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, para. 26, U.N. Doc. A/79/79 (2024).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, para. 11.

<sup>4</sup> #WiFi4Homeless: A Movement to Close the Digital Divide, NYC Bar & City Bar Just. Center 1, 3 (2021), <https://www.citybarjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Wifi4Homeless-2021-Report.pdf>.

From an anti-discrimination standpoint, free and guaranteed access to WiFi can further advance and reinforce the human rights to health, education, housing, political participation, and a range of related social, economic, cultural, and civil rights. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, digital health and education tools have drastically improved the landscape of telemedicine, health surveillance and diagnostic information, and access to remote education. Prioritizing the expansion and guarantee of WiFi in temporary shelter facilities would crucially center the rights and wellbeing of New York youth experiencing homelessness. In the past year alone, over 146,000 New York City students—averaging about one in every eight children enrolled in public schools—reportedly experienced homelessness.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 41% (or 60,395) of this aggregate population resided in New York City shelters, signaling a record high uptick from previous years.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, youth identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer (“LGBTQ youth”) constitute an estimated 40% of New York City’s shelter demographic,<sup>7</sup> a reflection of national demographic trends across runaway and homeless youth shelters that remains stark. Independently and in the context of other systemic, structural factors at play in New York, the overrepresentation of youth homelessness across New York shelter facilities speaks to the scale and magnitude of our state’s growing housing and homelessness crises. Moreover, the unacceptable dent in our systems in addressing the high proportion of youth in shelter who lack WiFi triggers a host of consequences—namely, their unmet developmental and emotional needs that arise from inadequate access to basic, remote educational resources.

The State must act to meet its basic responsibilities to its residents’ experiencing homelessness in our rapidly digitalizing world. **We urge the Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign, A.5649-A/S.4561-A, either as a standalone bill or part of the State Budget.** For the reasons we have outlined and supported on behalf of local advocacy groups tirelessly fueling the #WiFi4Homeless statewide campaign, reliable WiFi access to homeless New Yorkers in temporary shelter would be a step forward in our collective fight to end homelessness and advance housing justice. Furthermore, the bill’s endorsement by various committees in the state legislature—including, but not limited to, the Social Welfare Law, Education and the Law, Domestic Violence, Immigration and Nationality Law, LGBTQ Rights, and Legal Problems of the Aging Committees—reinforces the deeply entrenched, intersectional inequities that our movement must continue combatting.

We appreciate your leadership and attention in advancing this legislative goal in the 2025 session. It is a significant measure if we want to holistically address the lived realities of homelessness and poverty as a state budget priority—realities that have senselessly plagued the most vulnerable New Yorkers among us for far too long.

**Respectfully Submitted By:**

**Siya Hegde, Esq.**  
Staff Attorney

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<sup>5</sup> *Student Homelessness in New York City, 2023-24*, Advocates for Children of N.Y. (2024) 1, 1, [https://advocatesforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/nyc\\_student\\_homelessness\\_2024.pdf](https://advocatesforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/nyc_student_homelessness_2024.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> The Ali Forney Center (2024), <https://www.aliforneycenter.org/>.