

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Helen Strom, 646-602-5648, hstrom@urbanjustice.org
Natalie Druce, 646-923-8316, ndruce@urbanjustice.org

Homeless New Yorkers Sue Adams Administration to Halt Inhumane and Illegal Sweeps

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, October 30, 2024 — Yesterday, **six homeless New Yorkers**, along with **the Urban Justice Center – Safety Net Project (UJC-SNP)**, filed a federal lawsuit against the City of New York in the Southern District of New York, *Urban Justice Center - Safety Net Project et al. v. The City of New York et al.*, challenging the City’s practice of sweeping homeless people.

Sweeps, referred to by the City as “cleanups,” are a violent joint operation conducted by the New York Police Department (NYPD), the City’s Department of Homeless Services (DHS), Department of Sanitation (DSNY), and other City agencies, during which the City displaces street homeless New Yorkers and forces them to leave public locations where they have sought shelter. The City also seizes and destroys homeless residents’ belongings, including critical medication, warm clothing, bedding, critical personal documentation, artwork, family heirlooms, and more.

The lawsuit seeks an injunction prohibiting the City from continuing these harmful and unlawful policies and practices, as well as damages for the plaintiffs harmed by sweeps. The plaintiffs are represented by UJC-SNP, the National Homelessness Law Center (NHLC), and Beldock Levine & Hoffman LLP.

UJC-SNP will be hosting a rally and press conference at 4 PM today at Washington Square Park, Holley Statue. Plaintiffs, activists, and attorneys designated to speak to the media will be on site.

Homelessness is caused by lack of access to housing, yet, instead of focusing on these solutions, Mayor Adams continues to ramp up failed, expensive, and traumatic sweeps. Within the first several months of his tenure, Mayor Adams identified sweeps as a cornerstone of his homelessness policies, and the City currently conducts more than 4,000 homeless sweeps each year. Sweeps are also a critical part of Mayor Adams’ broken windows policies which dramatically expanded policing on the streets and subways to criminalize poverty and push homeless folks out of sight, all while cutting essential City services.

Mayor Adams must prioritize using the resources already at his disposal- including 4,000 vacant supportive housing beds as of September 2024, nearly [5,000 vacant public housing](#) (NYCHA) units, and [thousands more](#) affordable units sitting vacant directly under the City’s control. Mayor Adams has also refused to implement the CityFHEPS Laws passed by the City Council in July 2023, which would significantly expand access to housing vouchers to homeless New Yorkers, including those on the street. There are resources that could be used to address the housing and homelessness crises, yet the Mayor has focused on harassing and policing homeless people who have nowhere else to go.

Sweeps violate the civil rights of homeless New Yorkers, waste city resources, and make homelessness worse. Significantly, they endanger homeless people’s very survival year round and especially in the below-freezing winter. Sweeps also disconnect people from existing supports, displace them from their chosen location, and have severe, negative impacts on health and wellbeing. The experience of being repeatedly directed to leave their sites under threat from armed NYPD officers and then forced to watch as the City disposes of all their worldly belongings is deeply traumatizing.

Despite the City's claims to the contrary, homeless people are never offered permanent housing at sweeps and are rarely offered any meaningful services at all. In fact, sweeps make it harder to solve homelessness by severing relationships and trust between homeless people and outreach workers and

also often destroy personal documentation needed to obtain permanent housing, apply for public benefits, and seek employment. In reality, this massive deployment of City personnel and resources moves homeless New Yorkers further away from stability, services, and housing.

“The most harmful thing about sweeps is that they are limiting the things I can do to better my life,” **said plaintiff Damian Vorhees.** “I have to make a choice between leaving my belongings and going to work for the day and possibly coming back to nothing or staying at my site and babysitting my stuff. It’s a virtual leash. It’s keeping me in the position that I’m in that they’re supposedly trying to get me out of.”

“Imagine being outside living on the street and people come up to you telling you to leave the area, but you don’t know where to go,” **said plaintiff Eduardo Ventura.** “Do I go to another street, do I go to the subway station, do I go to another corner just to get pushed out again? It’s a huge disruption to our lives. As a homeless person, you already have nothing – but you’re trying to get better and then you are forced to be pushed around. It causes a lot of mental distress. How do I get out of the streets, when I’m constantly pushed out and being harassed?”

“Sweeps are cruel, counterproductive, and cause immense harm to homeless New Yorkers,” **said Natalie Druce, staff attorney with the Urban Justice Center - Safety Net Project.** “Permanently depriving homeless people of their personal belongings, including life-sustaining property, and forcibly relocating them during sweeps violates their civil and constitutional rights. Not only is the City’s conduct unlawful but it is punitive and ineffective—homeless people are being policed, punished for their existence in public space, and pushed further away from permanent housing.”

“The Adams administration has not prioritized the health and safety of New Yorkers—rather, it has opted to dehumanize and destabilize the city’s most at-risk communities by intensifying its illegal, inhumane, and ineffective sweeps policy,” **says Siya Hegde, a Staff Attorney from the National Homelessness Law Center.** “Its persistent reliance on policing tactics has not only triggered the perpetual, forced displacement of unsheltered New Yorkers, but has cost these individuals their personal belongings while devaluing their dignity and worth as human beings. The resultant practices of this policy represent an abject failure of city governance and exacerbate the troubling trend of criminalizing homelessness that is escalating across the country. Our hope is that this lawsuit will halt these inhumane practices. The City of New York must redirect its capacity and resources away from policing measures and towards ensuring that *every* New Yorker—including our street homeless neighbors—has a safe and dignified place to call home.”

“The City is seizing and destroying homeless New Yorkers personal belongings—including medications, mobility devices, journals, artwork, pictures of loved ones, warm clothing and blankets, and personal identification needed to obtain public benefits—without any process or recourse,” **said Keegan Stephan, an attorney with Beldock Levine & Hoffman.** “That type of government action would be unimaginable and widely renounced as cruel and unlawful in any other context, yet the City of New York is doing it to its most vulnerable residents every single day.”