

More than 150,000 people have arrived in less than two years, throwing the city into crisis. Missed opportunities made things even harder.



**By Andy Newman and Dana Rubinstein**

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Nearly 70,000 migrants crammed into hundreds of emergency shelters. People sleeping on floors, or huddled on sidewalks in the December cold. Families packed into giant tents at the edge of the city, miles from schools or services.

And New York City is spending hundreds of millions of dollars a month to care for them all.

This fall, an official in the administration of Mayor Eric Adams referred to the city's obligation to house and feed the 500 new migrants still arriving each day as "our new normal."

It is a normal that could scarcely have been imagined 18 months ago, when migrants began gravitating to the city in large numbers from the nation's southern border.

The migrant crisis in New York is the product of some factors beyond the city's control, including global upheaval, a federal government letting migrants enter in record numbers without giving most of them a way to work legally, and a unique local rule requiring the city to offer a bed to every homeless person.

But the dimensions of the problem — the \$2.4 billion cost so far, the harsh conditions, the number of migrants stuck in shelters — can also be traced to actions taken, and not taken, by the Adams administration, The New York Times found in dozens of interviews with officials, advocates and migrants.

As the city raced to improvise a system that has processed more than 150,000 people since last year, it stumbled in myriad ways, many never reported before.

For most of the crisis, the city failed to take basic steps to help migrants move out of shelters and find homes in a city famed for its sky-high rents. It waited a year to help large numbers of migrants file for asylum, likely closing a pathway to legal employment for thousands.

The city has signed more than \$2 billion in no-bid contracts, some with vendors that have been accused of abusing migrants. It has paid more than twice as much to house each migrant household as it did to house a homeless family before the crisis.



Mayor Eric Adams said that without more aid, the cost of sheltering migrants “will destroy New York City.” Critics say the city has overspent. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

And again and again, Mr. Adams, a Democrat with a prickly streak, seemed to make his own job harder by berating state and federal officials whose help he sought.

“The timeline is a series of late responses and antagonistic postures,” said Christine Quinn, head of the city’s biggest network of family shelters and a former City Council speaker.

City officials note that New York has received far more migrants than any big city outside the border states and that only New York must shelter them indefinitely. It has met that obligation over 99 percent of the time.

“While all of us have expertise in serving an aspect of this crisis, none of us are experts in essentially running a refugee system, which is what we are doing,” Molly Wasow Park, the mayor’s social services commissioner, said in October.

But too often, critics say, the city has made avoidable mistakes.

## The Pioneers



Migrants arrived in Washington, D.C., on buses sent by Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas in April 2022. Some immediately pressed on to New York City. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

On the warm spring morning of April 13, 2022, shortly after 8 a.m., a bus pulled up to a corner in Washington, D.C. Passengers got out looking lost, clutching manila folders of paperwork after a 26-hour ride from the Mexican border.

At least six men continued to New York City, in a van hired by Catholic Charities.

They were, in a sense, pioneers: passengers on the first migrant bus sent north by Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas as a stunt to protest border policy, and the first group of those migrants headed to New York.

More migrants came as the coronavirus pandemic subsided, fleeing destabilized countries. Venezuelans, whom the United States did not deport in the early days of the influx, arrived by the tens of thousands. Others came from Ecuador, Senegal, Mauritania, China.

Some found their way to a Catholic Migration Services office in Brooklyn, where employees found them sleeping outside. Aid groups sent them on to the city's homeless intake offices.

As the vacancy rate at family shelters dropped below 1 percent, officials scrambled to avoid defying the court decree guaranteeing a "right to shelter."

Julia Savel, then a spokeswoman for the city's social services commissioner, Gary Jenkins, said that Mr. Jenkins pressured her to hide a looming disaster from the public. "We don't have a single answer on how we were going to deal with this," she thought.

(Mr. Jenkins, who later resigned, said last week of Ms. Savel's assertion, "That is not true at all.")

By July 12, 2022, the situation was dire. On the phone with a relative, Ms. Savel broke down in tears: "I really think we're about to break the law."



New York City was already facing a housing crisis as thousands of migrants began to arrive. Dakota Santiago for The New York Times

A week later, Mr. Adams made his first extensive comments on the migrants. He said the city “welcomes newcomers with open arms.” After all, from New York’s historical perspective, this influx was unexceptional. What was unusual was how many migrants had no connections here and ended up at shelters.

The mayor added that the city had “a moral — and legal — obligation to house anyone who is experiencing homelessness.” He was confident help would come soon from Washington.

Ms. Savel visited the family intake office in the Bronx and found chaos. “Everyone coming in spoke Spanish; everyone working there spoke English. There was a woman in labor nine months pregnant sitting on the floor,” she said. “Children were crying because they were starving; we did not have enough food. It was wall-to-wall bodies.”

The city had violated its duty to house everyone. When the story broke, it had a minor scandal on its hands.

At one City Hall meeting that summer, nonprofits told officials that they should interview all the migrants to figure out what services could get them into permanent housing, according to three advocates who attended. The city and its contractors began doing some of this, but city officials acknowledged it was a year before they undertook a more comprehensive effort.

Without doing basic case management, critics said, the city did not know migrants' immigration status, what benefits they were eligible for or whether they might have relatives they could live with.

Mr. Adams accused Mr. Abbott of manufacturing New York's migrant influx. Mr. Abbott insisted he had sent buses only to Washington. It never became clear whose version was true.

But the governor did shift focus: "Governor Abbott decided that if Texas was going to get blamed for recent migrant arrivals to New York City, we may as well be sending them ourselves," Andrew Mahaleris, a spokesman for Mr. Abbott, told The Times.



At first, Governor Abbott denied sending migrant buses directly to New York City. After Mayor Adams blamed him for the influx, the governor changed course and began directing buses to the city, his spokesman said. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Early on Aug. 5, the first official Abbott bus arrived at the Port Authority terminal, the city's main bus station. By month's end, the city was sheltering nearly 6,000 migrants.

Most were grateful for a place to lay their heads. They came because the buses were free, but also because New York was an international symbol: the place where immigrants could make it.

“Even if there were other places,” said Kelvin Ortega, 28, who arrived that month, “we always knew we wanted to come here.”

As migrants spread word on social media about free shelter in New York, the numbers climbed.

# Scrambling for Beds



Desperate for a place to put people, the city turned to tent shelters, although some people warned of flooding risks. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

One day in early October 2022, it rained in the Bronx.

Less than an inch fell. But puddles formed in the parking lot at Orchard Beach, where a city contractor who had built part of the Trump-era border wall was erecting a tent complex for migrants.

Critics had warned that the lot was flood-prone and impractically remote. But the migrant population had doubled, to 12,000. The city, desperate for emergency housing, had “looked at 50 locations and found the best location,” the mayor said.

Besides, he said, “People live in flood zones.”



The city's first solution was to drill holes and pump water out. Then it discovered that the parking lot was built on old lumber, landfill and barges, and at risk of sinkholes.

City Hall about-faced and found a new spot: Randall's Island, farther south. But then migration temporarily slowed. The facility sat mostly empty for a month until the city took it down.

It was a herky-jerky, costly approach to crisis management that would come to typify the city's struggle to keep up with the ebb and flow of migrants.

That September, the agencies that might have been expected to run a homelessness emergency, the Department of Homeless Services or the Office of Emergency Management, said they were too overwhelmed. City Hall held a meeting and asked agencies to volunteer.

There was a pause.

"We'll do it," said Mitchell Katz, the head of the city's public hospitals. Early in the pandemic, his agency ran isolation hotels. This seemed like a "very similar undertaking," he noted.



Not long after the first tents went up, they were taken down during a brief pause in migrant arrivals. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

The hospital operator had been praised for its Covid response, but it had also made costly mistakes. As the hospital agency built tent dormitories and converted hotels into shelters, it returned to many of the same companies it used during the pandemic, though they lacked experience housing homeless people or serving migrants.

The Adams administration, in consultation with state officials, also explored an outside-the-box solution: cruise ships. To Frank Carone, then the mayor's chief of staff, they were "the best of the worst" options.

Mr. Carone got an estimate from an Estonian company that had housed Ukrainian refugees. He spoke with Norwegian Cruise Line. But when the administration floated the idea publicly, it was ridiculed. Some said the idea was cruel. Others argued it was too luxurious.

Then there was the question of sewage. Cruise ships, said Jackie Bray, the state commissioner of emergency services, “empty their sewage and things at sea, and so you have to either have a way to do that on shore or you have to put them out to sea every once in a while.”

The idea was abandoned but soon resurfaced in another form: a thousand-bed shelter at the cruise terminal in Brooklyn. The mayor spent a night on a cot there. “The team at the terminal is giving new meaning to the words ‘love thy neighbor,’” he said.

## Antagonizing Allies



Rosiel Ramirez, center, and her husband, Raymon Peña, were staying in a shelter with their children. But when the city offered bus tickets north, they decided to try their luck in Canada. Desiree Rios

By January, the migrant shelter population had doubled again, to 27,000. The city was offering people tickets out of town, including to the Canadian border.

Rosiel Ramirez, from Venezuela, was among those who wished for a warmer welcome elsewhere. Her family headed north, hoping, she said, that a new country would finally be “our Israel.”

Canadian officials angrily accused Mr. Adams of trying to export his migrant problem, just as Mr. Adams had accused Mr. Abbott of doing.

In January, a White House official met with a national mayors group. Conversation quickly turned to migrants.

During the closed-door gathering, Mr. Adams said the federal government seemed to have no plan to address the tremendous burden its immigration policies imposed on big cities, according to three people who were not authorized to discuss the situation publicly: an official who was present and two who were told about the interaction, including one briefed by the mayor.

The White House official, Julie Chávez Rodríguez, director of intergovernmental affairs, pushed back strongly.

Three months later, before meeting with White House officials, the mayor declared at a news conference, “The president and the White House have failed New York City on this issue.”

A White House statement at the time said that it was proud of the “significant investments we’ve made in New York City.”



In the early days, the city did some work to help migrants apply for asylum, but advocates and other elected officials said it wasn't enough. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

As the mayor's rift with the White House widened, his pleas for money and help were mostly ignored.

City Hall has argued that it was only after the mayor ramped up his rhetoric that the federal government began paying attention and sending aid. But even that was scant — \$156 million for a problem that the mayor said will cost \$12 billion over three years.

City officials decided to look within the state for help. In May, Mr. Adams told Steven Neuhaus, the Republican executive of Orange County, that he planned to send several dozen migrants to a hotel there. Mr. Neuhaus recalled that the mayor promised to do nothing until he gave him details.

"I never heard anything back," Mr. Neuhaus said. Soon, two buses of migrants, with New York City police escorts, arrived at an Orange County hotel.

That week, Mr. Adams castigated upstate officials on a conference call. “Every state lawmaker should have been in Washington, D.C., with me on my trips to say, ‘This can’t happen to our state,’” he said on a recording obtained by The Times.

The county executives did not respond as he hoped. More than two dozen issued orders to stop the city from housing migrants on their turf.



The city bused some migrants to upstate hotels, enraging some local leaders in those places. Cindy Schultz for The New York Times

In July, there was a brief rapprochement when upstate officials shared a vegan dinner at Gracie Mansion with the mayor. But within weeks, the city sent more migrant buses upstate, and officials again felt they were not given adequate warning.

“It angered everybody,” said Daniel McCoy, the Albany County executive.

Since then, City Hall has made a concerted effort to communicate better, he said. City Hall has argued that with thousands of migrants arriving each week, officials provide notice as early as they can.

For months, the mayor demanded that Gov. Kathy Hochul send more help. But his team's tendency to describe the migrant situation as worse than Covid alienated public officials who had helped manage the response to a pandemic that has killed 81,000 New Yorkers.

Tensions spilled into public view in August, when the state criticized the city for not making use of shelter sites the state had offered and for shipping migrants upstate with "little-or-no notice."

The state has committed nearly \$2 billion to the migrant response.

## A Sluggish Exit Strategy



Had the city moved faster on asylum, migrants might have moved out of shelters faster, some advocates and elected leaders said. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

In May, a reporter asked Deputy Mayor Anne Williams-Isom how many of the 72,000 migrants who had passed through the portals of the shelter system had applied for asylum. “Very few,” she answered, adding “We’re going to be working on that.”

Why so few, the reporter asked.

“They probably didn’t know where to get connected to services, didn’t know who to give their paperwork to,” Ms. Williams-Isom said.

It was a surprising admission for City Hall’s point person on the migrant response.

Applying for asylum — a complex, lengthy process with a one-year deadline — is one of few paths for people who cross the border to work legally.

The city had begged the federal government to expedite work authorization. But for a year, the city did little itself to get migrants on track to work, opening an asylum help center only in late June. If it had acted sooner, state officials wrote, “It is likely that thousands more migrants would be able to work today.”

The sluggishness was part of a pattern. For most of the crisis, the city seemed to ignore calls to provide more services to help migrants move out of shelters faster, a lapse that grew more costly with time.

Keeping a migrant family in a shelter for a month costs about \$12,000. Moving 10,000 families out of shelter would save over \$1 billion a year. But the city often appeared so overwhelmed trying to find a bed for everyone each night that it had little bandwidth for planning.

City Councilwoman Diana Ayala described the process like this: “You get here, they put you in a shelter, you stay in a shelter and a year passes.”

City Hall says that the asylum help center, staffed with lawyers, had not been made before and has become a national model.

“We are a municipality doing the federal government’s job,” said Ingrid Lewis-Martin, the mayor’s chief adviser. “They need to do their jobs.”



The Legal Aid Society had urged the city to file public assistance applications for migrants who had submitted asylum applications, since that income would help them obtain housing.

“They say they don’t have the staff to do that,” said Joshua Goldfein, a staff attorney for the group. “We said, ‘Why don’t you hire temps?’ and they kind of stare blankly.”

A city official said the city was prohibited from using temporary workers to process benefit applications and that Department of Homeless Services contractors are already supposed to help migrants in its shelters apply for benefits.

Outside a jail-turned-shelter in Harlem in August, three friends spoke about the grind of finding work and a home. One, Gregorio Velasco, 40, was on crutches after wiping out on his delivery motorcycle in the rain. His friend Obson Bruteis, a 29-year-old from Haiti, said they struggled to stay optimistic as they searched for odd jobs.

“So far, everything has been temporary,” he said. “But we keep going out every day to look for it.”



Throughout the crisis, migrants like Gregorio Velasco have expressed gratitude for the help the city has given them. Many also said they are desperate to become independent as soon as they can. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

It was only when hospital officials opened an arrival center in May at the Roosevelt, a faded but once-grand Midtown hotel, that the city began more thoroughly canvassing migrants to find out what they needed to become self-sufficient.

“We’re starting to have those conversations now,” Dr. Ted Long, who leads the hospital agency’s migrant response, told the City Council in August.

Obscured by the migrant crisis was another factor crowding the shelters: rising homelessness among people who already lived here. According to a Times analysis of city data, the non-migrant population of the main shelter system is up 20 percent under Mr. Adams.

## Out of Room, Again



Dozens of men slept on the street in July, although homeless shelter beds were available. The city said the beds were reserved for non-migrants. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

On a warm July day, a line formed outside the Roosevelt Hotel. Inside, beneath a sparkling chandelier, families were signed in and vaccinated. Dr. Long said he imagined the old luxury hotel as “a new Ellis Island.”

But for some migrants, the doors did not open.

Men stood outside for hours, waiting to be assigned a shelter bed. Then they sat. And then, as hours and then days passed, they slumped to the ground, onto the backpacks they had hoisted on their backs for weeks, or onto each other. Some shielded themselves from the summer sun with cardboard boxes.

One migrant, Abdelkerim, 30, from Chad, said he had expected better from New York. “We’ve been sleeping on the floor since we got here,” he said. “It’s really pathetic.”

Mr. Adams said the system had finally broken. “From this moment on, it’s downhill,” he said. “There is no more room.”

In truth, there were hundreds of empty shelter beds, but the city said it had to reserve them for other homeless New Yorkers.



One city official called the Roosevelt Hotel, which had been transformed into a homeless intake center and shelter, “a new Ellis Island.” Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Conditions at some shelters were desperate. Migrants were housed for weeks in “respite centers” that sometimes lacked basics like showers. One shelter in a converted Manhattan office building had no air conditioning.

In September, Mr. Adams said that without more federal aid, “this issue will destroy New York City.” He called for a 15 percent city budget cut, citing migrant costs.

But the mayor’s critics said the budgetary damage was partly self-inflicted. Throughout the crisis, the city has relied heavily on no-bid emergency contracts with private companies that increased costs dramatically. Of course, the migrant crisis *is* an emergency, and extra spending is inevitable. But the amount, City Council members have said, was not.

Before the migrant influx, the city paid an average of \$188 per day to shelter a family with children. Now it is paying nearly \$400 for each migrant “household,” which includes single adults.

Some of the more eye-popping charges have been from DocGo, a medical services firm enlisted by the hospital system to run services at the Roosevelt. During the pandemic, DocGo swabbed half a million noses for the city’s testing program. For the migrants, the hospitals paid DocGo millions to handle jobs far beyond its expertise, including security, casework and school enrollment.

DocGo was allowed to charge \$33 a day per migrant for shelter meals, triple some other vendors’ rates. It charged \$150 an hour for registered nurses while another provider, MedRite, charged \$80.



DocGo, a medical service provider that did Covid testing during the pandemic, was given responsibilities to serve homeless migrants that went far beyond its expertise.  
Leonardo Munoz/Viewpress/Corbis via Getty Images

This spring, hospital leaders recommended DocGo for a \$432 million contract with the city’s housing department that included moving migrants to upstate motels. It hired unregistered security guards, gave some migrants fake work authorization papers, and guards threatened migrants with violence, some migrants said.

Now, DocGo faces investigations by the state attorney general and the city comptroller.

DocGo officials have pushed back against criticism of their management of the migrant contracts. The city has said it took the allegations seriously and would cooperate with investigations.

This month, the comptroller, Brad Lander, restricted the mayor’s emergency power to contract for migrant services without review. His spokeswoman pointed to “extensive failures” by the city.

# An Unimaginable New Normal



The city turned to tent shelters again in the second half of this year. One of them was opened for families at a remote campground in Brooklyn. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

The city recently opened its first tent complex for families at a disused airport so far on the fringes that it has long been used as a campground. Families stay in drafty warrens of tiny cubicles; the shelter rules entitling them to private kitchens and bathrooms were suspended in May.

The city that the mayor said “welcomes newcomers with open arms” is offering more and more of them plane and bus tickets out of town, and forcing some migrants to leave shelters every 30 days and reapply if they want to get back in.

The tactic works: Most do not try to return. But those who do sometimes sleep on the sidewalk outside an office to hold their place in line. Shoving matches have broken out.

Power Malu, who runs a volunteer aid group, Artists Athletes Activists, called the scenes “fabricated chaos.”

President Biden, whose options on immigration are limited by Republican control of the House, eventually granted special status to many Venezuelans, allowing them to apply for work permits. About 5,000 people in New York have applied, and 3,500 have been approved.



Mr. Adams has said he no longer expects help with migrants anytime soon from the federal government. Al Drago for The New York Times

Mr. Adams returned this month from at least his 10th trip to Washington convinced, he said, of “the cold reality that help is not on the way in the immediate future.”



New Yorkers' patience has frayed. This fall, as the mayor also confronted an investigation into potential corruption in his campaign, his approval rating sank to a dismal 28 percent.

In an interview, Ms. Williams-Isom, the deputy mayor, dismissed the carping of critics, saying that “20-20 hindsight is wonderful. ‘Why didn’t you do this sooner?’ ‘Why didn’t you know that sooner?’” She said New Yorkers should be proud of how the city responded to what is ultimately a national problem with “dignity, care, innovation and love for the people that are coming here: our newest New Yorkers.”

One such newcomer, John Rodríguez, 20, arrived from Venezuela in August 2022. Except for a doomed one-month excursion to Ohio, where he couldn’t support himself, he has been in shelters here ever since. In July, he married a woman he met in a shelter.

Mr. Rodríguez eventually filed for asylum with help from a church, not the city. Despite the city’s expanded outreach, he was not aware that under Mr. Biden’s program for Venezuelans, he probably qualifies for a work permit.



John Rodríguez, of Venezuela, was among the first arrivals in 2022. He has yet to figure out how he can afford to leave the city's homeless shelter system, despite finding work. Salvador Espinoza for The New York Times

Like many migrants, he is thankful for the help the city has offered. Even as the city urges him and thousands of others to go elsewhere, he hopes he can instead stay and find his footing.

So far, the only job he has been able to find is off the books as a deliveryman. But eventually, Mr. Rodríguez said, "I would love to have a company that would put all the Venezuelans to work."

Joseph Goldstein, Raúl Vilchis, Olivia Bensimon, Jay Root and Nicholas Fandos contributed reporting.

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