

STARR

STRATEGIC TRANSGENDER ALLIANCE FOR RADICAL REFORM

Mariah Lopez
Executive Director of STARR

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Testimony
Joint Budget Hearing

Dear honorary members of the New York State Senate and the New York State Assembly,

My name is Mariah Lopez. I am an activist, and the current executive director of STARR, or the Strategic Trans Alliance for Radical Reform.

I am submitting this testimony to request that this committee provide funding to reduce homelessness among trans and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals in the Capital Region.

My organization is requesting that members of this committee provide a budget line item of an additional fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) for the advancement of the very real work being done to fight homelessness by groups such as STARR and New York Transgender Advocacy Group (NYTAG).

Specifically, such funding would allow groups such as ours to hire a staff member to work full time on further developing a housing program for TGNC individuals who fall through the social services gaps. It will follow an emergency drop-in shelter model, and potentially expand to include longer term options such as transitional living-assistance.

Currently, most advocates and experts battling the homelessness crisis in New York agree that street homelessness is not the only—or even the worst—type of homelessness. STARR equates housing ‘instability’ to homelessness. TGNC who couch hop; young TGNC adults put out by

their relatives several times a month; TGNC sex workers hotel hopping in order to save up for safe housing; STARR considers all these individuals to be homeless.

As a sobering fact that I hope supports STARR's request, this committee should know that upstate New York currently has no trans-lead social service organizations. None. STARR again, at this point only provides advocacy. When it comes to accessing housing and healthcare, trans Upstaters and visitors are forced to turn to the numerous organizations that are not designed by and for TGNC people—and are often, instead, run by and for cis gender individuals.

And that's a disservice: Trans people understand homelessness very well. One could almost say that it's in our DNA and a fundamental experience responsible for igniting the modern trans right movement. Afterall, STARR and the entire TLGBQ movement was formed on the backs of two famous—famously homeless—trans women.

STARR: Housing Activists Then, Housing Activists Now

STARR was formed by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two transgender women who fought at the Stonewall rebellion. Both Marsha and Sylvia were homeless by STARR's definition today. They realized that the socio-economic needs of their community—housing, employment, and healthcare—should be the focus of their work.

The mainstream gay and lesbian civil rights movement focused on the repeal of laws inhibiting the lives of middle class, cisgender whites. Groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activist Alliance refused to work with STARR on addressing the needs of the community's less fortunate. So like the Black Panthers and Young Lords, Marsha and Sylvia used STARR to create revolutionary programs which we now take for granted—including the first ever emergency shelter for TGNC New Yorkers.

In 1970, Marsha and Sylvia officially launched STAR house (which would later become “STARR”), a trans rights organization (then first in the nation) that would focus on political

visibility and action, as well as the provision of direct housing and nutrition services to homeless TLGBQ youth, some as young as nine years old.

This was a time in New York history when life was particularly brutal for gay and trans individuals; especially the poor, individuals with disabilities or victims of sexual violence and trafficking, and youth from the city or who escaped a brutal foster care system.

STAR provided a lifeline. During this period STAR members who were older, usually in their late teens, would work the streets while the other younger or disabled members remained safe, either at the STAR headquarters (which doubled as a shelter) or at a hotel.

But, this model was not sustainable. Poor people can only do so much to help other poor people. Plus, homelessness comes with a heavy cost. STAR's founders suffered, and so did the movement when the structure of the organization collapsed under the weight of ails from long term homelessness, problematic drug use, and poor healthcare access. Over the decades to come, homelessness would contribute to the deaths of both Sylvia and Marsha, and in deed many, many more, if we had those numbers.

Years ago, after Sylvia had passed on STARR to a new generation of activists and advocates, we realized that homelessness was still a common experience among almost all individuals who reached out for our help. Our new model centered referral-based crisis management as our everyday work.

Today, we've realized that, although there are many new beds for trans individuals, they are all in New York City, and most beds still maintain barriers blocking TGNC folk's access. STARR knew that a minimum barrier option (such as an emergency drop in shelter) was needed, ASAP.

The question became not if we should open a new STARR shelter in the 21st century—and certainly not why. The questions became *When?* and *Where?*

The answers are straightforward. *Now. The Capital Region.*

The Need for a Capital-Region Emergency Shelter Run By & For TGNC Folks

TGNC folk who live near the capital are disadvantaged in terms of resources when compared to individuals and communities from New York City. Almost every penny of the state’s resources outlined in the Governor’s current budget will go towards addressing the issue of homelessness among TGNC individuals and communities ‘downstate’. Many TGNC individuals live and work in the Capital Region, and many live without safe or stable housing, or report having such an experience at some point.

This committee has the power to address the obvious need for funds that go towards basic social services, specifically an emergency shelter run by and for TGNC folk in the Capital Region.

Although STARR has been impressed by the Governor’s leadership thus far, this is an issue that needed to be raised. Someone needed to direct this committee’s attention to the plight of unhoused TGNC folk—some of whom live in the shadows of this very building.