



"I love being in New York—no one is afraid to speak their mind here."

Born in Moscow, Russia, the child of two Soviet refuseniks, Jessica Katz was raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. From an early age she knew what she wanted to do. At the age of 19, she left her urban planning program at McGill University to begin working in supportive housing full time. Though initially interested in becoming a social worker; Ms. Katz realized she was a born project planner. An eye opening summer internship gave her the opportunity to combine her passion for urban planning with a deep drive toward public service. Ms. Katz currently serves as the Assistant Commissioner of Special Needs Housing and Senior Adviser. Her role recently expanded to incorporate the coordination of HPD policy on homeless and disability policy issues.

Ms. Katz received a master's degree in urban planning from MIT. While in graduate school, she developed a 15-unit supportive housing project, 803 Cambridge Street, and then served as the building's superintendent. This opportunity provided a very unique perspective: "I had front row seats to how the decisions I made as a project manager turned into people's lived experiences."

JESSICA KATZ

New York City Department of
Housing Preservation and Development

Ibo Balton Community Planner Award

Ms. Katz began her career with HPD in 2003, and started as the Production Manager for Special Needs Housing. At that time, the department was producing 400 to 500 supportive housing units per year; it now produces over 1,000. Ms. Katz believes that "even those with the most severe set of challenges can be very successful in supportive housing." Due in no small part to the on-the-ground experience and dedication of Ms. Katz and others, and the recognized importance of collaboration among organizations, supportive housing in general has undergone many changes in the past ten years. "We are introducing new populations, new financing models, and new stakeholders and partners. While the definition of supportive housing has expanded, we are also trying to target more and focus on deepening the targeting so that we can provide service to those who need it the most," Ms. Katz says.

Those who need it the most, though, often do not have the strongest voices in their communities. "I attend a lot of community meetings, and my job is to listen to people and understand what their hopes and their fears are but also to be able to help people think through what is the best thing for their community. My job is also to provide a voice in those meetings for those who are in and of that community, but aren't always



803 Cambridge Street

able to show up and demand their due.” In 2010, Ms. Katz worked on the West End True Colors Project in Central Harlem, a project for LGBT youth. This project encapsulated the critical connection between financing, construction, and finding common ground to support a previously underserved population.

Increasingly each year, Ms. Katz and the 25-person Department of Special Needs Housing staff find new and better ways to serve New York’s most vulnerable community members: “attesting to the humanity of the populations we serve is the part of my job that I care about the most.”



True Colors Residence, Harlem
photo credit: David Sundberg / Esto



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