

# When Privilege Isn't Enough:

## WHAT MY CRISIS REVEALED ABOUT NEW YORK'S SOCIAL SAFETY THEATER

By **Seth Foss**

BA Psychology Honors | Public Policy, Hunter College | Roosevelt House, Public Service Scholar

[Seth.foss@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:Seth.foss@hunter.cuny.edu)

By all accounts, I wasn't supposed to fall through the cracks.

White. Male. Educated. Connected.

A mid-career student of public policy at Hunter College with a fellowship in social reform, legal research in housing rights, and an inbox full of contacts from elected officials, advocacy groups, and city agencies.

And yet—there I was. Slipping anyway.

The hardships I've endured over the past three years shouldn't have happened to someone like me. That's not a self-pitying confession; it's an indictment. Because if *\*I\** can be so easily lost in the maze of New York's celebrated social safety net, what hope is there for the people it was actually designed to protect?

Let's be clear: this isn't a story about the absence of racism. This isn't the feel-good version where privilege saves the day. Quite the opposite. It's about the sobering reality that even when whiteness, education, and access are stacked in your favor, dysfunction still wins.

And that makes the dysfunction even more damning.

New York State and City love their welfare accolades. We brand ourselves as the vanguard of human rights, a progressive haven with the "largest" protections, the "most robust" benefits, and the "most innovative" social programs in the country. But behind every press release and policy announcement lies a quieter truth: the system isn't broken—it's performative.

During my time at Hunter, I've authored legal proposals, advocated for tenants facing unrelenting harassment, and sat in rooms where "equity" was a checkbox and urgency was always a memo away. I've seen up close how the machinery works—and how it stalls. Not from malice, but from apathy. Not from sabotage, but from shrugging indifference.

I've also lived through it.

I've been denied basic services I qualified for. Bounced between departments like a bureaucratic pinball. Forgotten in queues. Misfiled. Ignored. I've faced months-long delays in aid disbursement, housing assistance withheld without explanation, and watched as policy loopholes were used not to protect but to evade responsibility.

And I wasn't alone. For every time I thought, this can't be real, I met someone else who'd lived it longer, with fewer lifelines and far greater costs.

What does it say about a system when even those trained to navigate it—those who write about it, draft policy to improve it, and understand its weaknesses—still get ground down by its indifference?

For Immediate Release

May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025, 12:09 am

The scariest part? Most of these failings weren't intentional. They were bureaucratic omissions, institutional laziness, policy shells without teeth. In a city with entire agencies allegedly dedicated to inclusion and justice, I learned firsthand how easy it is to fall victim to neglect masquerading as order.

My decision to return to school in my thirties wasn't a whim—it was a commitment to a purpose. A career pivot toward public service, driven by a voice that had echoed in me for years: this matters—pay attention. And I have. To the ways people are failed. To the policies that pretend. To the loneliness of doing the right thing in a world built to reward complicity.

What I've learned at Hunter College—beyond the academic theory and the case studies—is that advocacy in New York often means standing alone. That to fight for everyone, you must be ready to be left behind. That our famed safety net has more holes than threads. And that the gold-plated promise of "universal rights" is often just that—a promise.

So no, this op-ed isn't about me. It's about the deeply troubling fact that what happened to me could, and does, happen to thousands of others—only they don't have a platform, a degree program, or institutional proximity to draft legislation in response.

It's about the fact that our welfare system is only as strong as its ability to function in moments of crisis. And right now, it doesn't.

To whoever holds the next title above my signature—whether you're a commissioner, councilmember, agency head, mayor, or governor—let this serve as your advance notice.

I didn't come here to push paper. I came to change the trajectory of people's lives.

And I will only stand beside those who move with the same urgency, the same fire, and the same intolerance for mediocrity masquerading as governance. If you've grown comfortable gatekeeping equity behind procedure, policy, or platitudes—make room. Because I will not sit quietly beside you. I will challenge you. I will outwork you. And if necessary, I will ensure you are pushed out by the very people you were supposed to serve.

There is no neutrality in justice. And no patience left for those who perform it.