

Opinion

NYC has to now measure the true cost of living



Cost of living (Shutterstock)



By **JENNIFER JONES AUSTIN**

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Everyone knows the lyrics of the classic [Frank Sinatra](#) song about New York City: “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere.”

But we’re seeing that long-time truism turned on its head, with hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers now deciding to take their chances on making it anywhere but here after building a life in our beloved city has proved impossible due to our affordability crisis.

We all may love New York, but the [exodus of residents we’ve experienced over the past few years](#) — 78,000 in 2023, on top of 125,000 in 2022 — is proof that even love can’t overcome skyrocketing costs of child care, housing, food, and other essential needs.

Recognizing something had to be done, a whopping 81% of the [NYC electorate decided in 2022](#) that the City of New York must develop and report an annual “true cost of living” measurement, beginning in 2024. These voters’ calls for a better measurement system resoundingly echoed the sentiments of their fellow New Yorkers who testified before the [NYC Racial Justice Commission](#) throughout the year before.

As the commission’s chair, I along with my fellow commissioners heard repeatedly from everyday New Yorkers, mostly persons of color, about their struggles to get by and get ahead in a city where you can’t even begin to plan for tomorrow because you are financially challenged to get through today.

For them, “making it” in New York meant more than having just enough income to cover their most basic needs; it meant having enough to cover those additional expenses that allow them to not just survive, but most importantly, to thrive — helping ensure that they and their families can pursue better futures.

Looking back at the demographic makeup of the 81% — New Yorkers of all races and ethnicities, all income brackets, all neighborhoods, and all political party affiliations — this vote all but predicted the growing exodus of New Yorkers considered middle income. No longer is it only individuals and families living at 200% or below the poverty threshold who are forced to choose between which essential bills to pay; many at upwards of 400% above the poverty level are being forced to do the same.

Thanks to the actions of this 81% of the electorate, the Adams administration will be the first to establish a true cost of living measure for the City of New York. Capturing the voters’ intent — as best reflected in the ballot proposal and abstract — is imperative as we move towards implementation of this new measure.

The ballot abstract text states that the proposed true cost of living measurement is “intended to focus on dignity rather than poverty, by considering the cost of meeting essential needs including, but not limited to, housing, childcare, child and dependent expenses, food, transportation, healthcare, clothing, general hygiene products, cleaning products, household items, telephone service, and internet service.” This language emphasizes the Commission’s intent to reflect the people’s voices and concerns.

Commissioners appreciated that while the existing measures of economic need — including the federal poverty measure, the supplemental poverty measure, and the self-sufficiency standard — have proven valuable for determining who is eligible for and in need of critical income supports, they are fundamentally centered in only basic self-sufficiency of what it costs to get by.

We acknowledged that a true cost of living measure must be centered in economic security — what it costs to get by, get ahead, and stay ahead.

A true cost of living measure cannot undercount or ignore expenses that contribute to the likelihood of either enhancing or impeding one’s economic security — costs such as financial debt and savings for asset building, retirement, and a rainy day.

The commission understood that for New Yorkers working to get ahead, especially those whose opportunities have been diminished by structural and institutional racism, a new measure that captures both present-day daily costs and spending and savings to support future wealth-building would help our city to see and understand the full, complex financial picture. Only by recognizing the most acute pain points can the city move earnestly to do something about them.

As the Adams administration now acts with a sense of urgency, spurred not only by the Charter-imposed timeline but also by the daily departure of tax-paying residents and their families seeking a more affordable and prosperous life, promulgating a true cost of living measure is more than a mandate; it's foundational to the planning the city must undertake to stem the tide and ensure our beloved New York remains the place known the world over as where dreams for all really can and do come true.

Jones Austin is the CEO of FPWA and Chair of the NYC Racial Justice Commission.
