



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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LOWELL D. KERN
Chair

JESSE R. BODINE
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August 05, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Steven Banks
Commissioner
Human Resources Administration &
Department of Social Services
150 Greenwich Street 40th Fl.
New York, NY 10007

Re: COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis and Temporary Relocation of 2,100 Single Adult Shelter Beds to Manhattan Community Board 4

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Banks:

Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) represents an open and inclusive community that has a minimum of ten shelters, twenty supportive housing sites, and numerous other social services. We have a history of working with nonprofit providers and collaborating with stakeholders to ensure that residents and tenants alike can live in a community where all are welcome, seen, and heard.

MCB4 completely understands the urgency to protect the lives of congregate shelter residents due to the COVID-19 crisis; congregate shelter does not allow for social distancing or isolation of sick individuals. The Department of Homeless Services (DHS) understandably had to relocate residents in congregate settings to individual hotel rooms on a temporary basis to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. However, temporarily housing over 2,100 residents within the MCB4 district with little to no operational or programing strategy is inadequate management of this crisis. Consultation with MCB4 would have alerted the administration of the specific blocks that are already stressed due to existing shelters and supportive housing facilities that suffer from poor management. The result has been the following:

- I. A concentration of shelters in one neighborhood, destabilizing individual blocks;
- II. A lack of coordination of site selection with MCB4, elected officials and the community;
- III. A lack of guidelines for security, safety, and appropriate services at selected hotels; and,
- IV. An absence of consideration to shelter residents' social service needs for well-being.

At its full board meeting on July 22, 2020, MCB4, by a vote of 47 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible, voted to approve this letter in the hope that these concerns can be addressed by your agency.

I. Concentration of Relocation Shelter Beds in Tourist Hotels

In a three-week period over 2,100 shelter beds were relocated to tourist hotels in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. As of this letter, MCB4 is aware of eight temporary shelters in our district, all concentrated in Hell's Kitchen between West 36th Street and West 57th Street.

Three temporary shelters alone were relocated to *West 36th and West 37th Streets* between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, totaling 800 beds. This significant concentration of shelters resulted in neighbors attending a number of MCB4 Committee meetings and reporting incidents of mental and/or emotional disturbance that results in aggressive physical and verbal behavior not only among shelter residents themselves but also towards neighbors. We have also received reports of public intoxication and narcotics use. The residents of the block often observed shelter residents not wearing masks or maintaining social distance, loitering, littering, and getting into verbal altercations. One neighbor reported he was mugged by a shelter resident.

The Board is concerned that these dangerous conditions on the blocks noted above may result in tragic incidents for shelter residents and the neighbors on the block, and that DHS must address and modify the current situation as needed, to bring a more measured, thoughtful response to its actions.

MCB4 strongly urges DHS to significantly reduce the number of shelter clients on West 36th Street. A more equitable distribution of relocation sites would have prevented some of the issues the neighborhood is currently facing.

II. Lack of Coordination for Site Selection

In a three-week period over 2,100 shelter beds were relocated to tourist hotels in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood with little or no notice. The shelter beds have come from all parts of the city, the Bowery on the Lower East Side, Coney Island in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Far Rockaway in Queens. It appears there was no planning, no discussion, and no notification to elected officials or to MCB4.

DHS has failed to provide the Community Board and local elected officials with the opportunity for any input into the selection of hotels for the relocation of congregate

residents. At best we learn of congregate residents' moves the day of the move. We have no chance to even brief the local community or block associations of the move. In fact, NYPD was not informed of the Washington Jefferson relocation site until they were notified by a neighbor on West 51st Street.

We believe even in this state of emergency due to the pandemic, DHS at a minimum could provide one to two weeks prior notification. Notice is critical to manage expectations and prepare residents of a community and block. DHS notifying a community while residents are in transport or after they were in hotel rooms creates the appearance of DHS's disregard to community input and insight.

For example, note that our letter from June 3, 2020 explains that MCB4 could have provided context for the Washington Jefferson emergency relocation site on West 51st Street¹. We would have pointed out the deleterious effects a new shelter would have on this block, which already has a homeless facility and a problematic supportive housing site.

It is our understanding that shelter hotels have month to month contracts with DHS and that they are temporary. Although we understand the need for these emergency temporary relocation sites, we would appreciate DHS explaining the time frame for how these shelter hotels will be phased out as the COVID-19 crisis winds down.

III. Guidelines for Security and Safety

DHS contracts with numerous non-profit providers and has set guidelines for the organization to adhere to. DHS should be doing the same when they relocate a congregate shelter into a hotel. This action will also help manage expectations of community residents.

For example, two operators - Project Renewal and Black Veterans for Social Justice (BVSJ) - have different methods to engage and monitor their residents outside of their temporary relocation site. Project Renewal on West 51st Street has security staff that are tasked to walk along the block twice per hour while BVSJ on West 57th Street have staff sitting in front of the hotel and security walking the block to specific checkpoints where they scan a QR code (a square barcode) for oversight. BVSJ was also more open to feedback from community members and agreed to have additional locations be checkpoints with QR codes. The BVSJ approach on West 57th Street is much more successful.

Currently, it is up to the Community Board and local elected officials to engage providers and request certain measures be put in place to increase mask wearing, decrease loitering, and to discourage groups of clients congregating, causing disruption, and accosting neighbors.

¹ <https://cbmanhattan.cityofnewyork.us/cb4/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/06/16-HHHS-Letter-to-DHS-re-Relocation-of-Shelter-to-W-51st-Street-Hotel.pdf>

DHS should establish clear guidelines for effective security, monitor conditions regularly and insist or provide additional social services as necessary. DHS should initiate a district wide Community Advisory Committee or Board (CAC/CAB) and hold regular meetings with all providers to discuss issues as they arise, and to seek solutions.

IV. Consideration of Shelter Residents' Needs

DHS must seek locations for shelter hotels in areas closer to the original shelter location so shelter residents can remain connected to health and social services. Although protection from the coronavirus is top priority, the social service needs of congregate residents should be taken into consideration as well. Suddenly relocating residents from their familiar neighborhood and tearing them away from their local networks is at best jarring, at worst, traumatic. Being closer to their community and services would be less disruptive. For example, the men relocated from Brooklyn at the temporary hotel shelter at West 57th Street might have been better served remaining in Brooklyn or at least lower Manhattan. Additionally, the Washington Jefferson Hotel residents were in lower Manhattan and went to West 51st Street; there are numerous hotels in lower Manhattan. As mentioned before, we have received reports of significant increase in the number of shelter residents engaging in public intoxication and narcotics as well as experiencing incidents of mental and/or emotional distress on the streets in our district. Perhaps there would be fewer disruptive behaviors in a familiar neighborhood.

DHS and the operator should aim to work with hotels that have access to their own private outdoor space so residents have access to open space that is more appealing than the sidewalk. The West 25th Street BRC facility in Chelsea is a good example; a roof top deck was established for residents. In addition to rooftops, some hotels have interior court yards or front yards. Perhaps even a large conference room could be identified for socializing.

As a result of the congregate shelter relocation initiative all of the families with children in temporary housing at the Skyline Hotel Shelter location on Tenth Avenue and West 49th Street were relocated without community notice and replaced with 225 male residents. Principals and Teachers in local schools reported they were not provided any notice. DHS is well aware that keeping children and parents in or close to their community is less destabilizing.

Conclusion

We appreciate DHS meeting with MCB4's leadership numerous times to discuss the lack of notice, community, and resident issues. We also commend DHS for finally addressing the situation on West 51st Street and relocating the temporary shelter residents.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its life-threatening severity, mandates a higher standard of management and we therefore strongly urge DHS to:

1. Remove or reduce the temporary shelters on West 36th Street.
2. Provide notification and request community input about site selection including to local elected officials;

3. Set guidelines to management approaches, particularly about security and safety and establish a clear chain of command considering NYPD is no longer responding to non-emergency homeless issues.
4. Lead a monthly meeting with all the nonprofit providers and other community stakeholders.

Transparency, communication, and collaboration are necessary to achieve effective shelter relocation sites. This is especially significant because the precipitous actions of DHS are turning our community, which has a long history of welcoming shelters and supportive housing, against such residences in the future.

We look forward to continued collaboration with DHS to establish best practices for shelter relocation hotel sites, including alternative sites, as well as maintaining the stability of our existing residential neighborhoods.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,



Lowell D. Kern
Chair
Manhattan
Community Board 4



Maria Ortiz
Co-Chair
Housing, Health
Human Services Committee



Joe Restuccia,
Co-Chair
Housing, Health
Human Services Committee

- cc: Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council
 Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
 Hon. Helen Rosenthal, City Council
 Hon. Jerry Nadler, U.S. Congress
 Hon. Brad Hoylman, New York State Senate
 Hon. Robert Jackson, New York State Senate
 Hon. Richard Gottfried, New York State Assembly
 Hon. Linda B. Rosenthal, New York State Assembly