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June 23, 2021

Steve Banks
Commissioner
Department of Homeless Services
33 Beaver Street, 17th Floor
New York, NY 10004

**Re: Status of Temporary Hotel Shelters, Homelessness & Safety Issues in
Manhattan Community District 4**

Dear Commissioner Banks,

The Housing, Health, and Human Services Committee (HHHS) of Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) was briefed by the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) on May 20, 2021 about their progress on vaccinations and plan for shelter clients to return to congregate settings. The HHHS Committee requested for DHS senior leadership to come to the meeting, but they were not present. Nonetheless, the Committee appreciates Leilani Irvin, Manhattan Borough Director and Yvonne Tinsley, Associate Commissioner of Adult Shelter Operations, for being present at the HHHS Committee meeting.

MCB4 at its regularly scheduled Full Board meeting on June 2, 2021 voted by a vote of 44 in favor, 0 opposed, 2 abstain and 0 present not eligible, to support the following recommendations:

- DHS must provide vaccinations on-site at a greater frequency than once per month
- DHS must outline a specific metric for shelter clients to return to congregate settings
- DHS must share a Covid-19 safety plan for residents and staff in congregate settings
- DHS must create incentives that are desirable for residents and staff to be vaccinated

Background

Between May and June of 2020, DHS relocated 2,142 shelter beds for single individuals, many of whom suffer from mental illness, alcohol, and chemical addiction to Manhattan

Community District 4 (MCD4). These shelters were temporarily relocated to protect individuals in congregate shelters from the spread of Covid-19. However, there were several unintended consequences. Due to poor communication and poor management by some providers, as well as decreased social services, DHS has contributed to a public safety crisis affecting multiple communities.

MCB4 has written four letters to DHS about the density reduction sites: June, August and October of 2020, and in April of 2021 the Chair of MCB4, Lowell Kern, requested for DHS senior leadership to attend our HHHS Committee meeting and to provide a plan of safely returning residents and staff back to congregate settings.

MCB4 also requested a district-wide Community Advisory Board (CAB) in its August 2020 letter after weekly meetings with various providers that were new to the community. In September of 2020, DHS announced at the HHHS Committee meeting that the CAB will begin to meet in early October 2020. MCB4 requested and appreciates the collaboration with DHS to hold monthly meetings with all the providers of the temporary shelter sites.

Committee Discussion

Vaccinations

DHS reported that the agency has been distributing vaccinations to residents and staff at one hub per borough; Manhattan's hub location is in Chelsea at the Bowery Residents' Committee. There has also been testing offered once per month, serving 11-12 shelters per day. The DHS representatives shared that currently around 18,000 vaccination shots have been administered to their clients and staff — with around 12,000 now fully vaccinated. This was up from the figure last reported at the end of March of 11,600 doses administered. They pointed to vaccination hesitancy as a major factor in the low numbers.

It is widely known that there is vaccine hesitancy in communities of color, and in fact, many of the residents in shelter facilities in NYC are people of color. MCB4 believes vaccine distribution must be as accessible as possible and be provided to residents and staff on-site at every shelter in our district, including more than once per month, which is the current rate at which vaccinations are given on-site.

Public Safety

Public safety has declined in Clinton/Hell's Kitchen and West Midtown. Residents and visitors alike have been subject to a serious and unacceptable situation. In the past 12 months HHHS has had over 500 members of the public attend meetings. At every meeting, many community residents of MCD4 have spoken about these matters. These matters are not quality of life issues. They constitute a public safety crisis.

Recent Assaults Involving Temporary Homeless Shelter Clients

In a recent briefing with the Deputy Inspector Steven Hellman regarding the NYPD detail for the Business District Recovery Initiative, Inspector Hellman shared that there has been a 1900% increase in crime. The West 43rd Street assault is only one symptom of unsafe street conditions. That assault comes after the assault of a neighborhood resident on West 37th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues by a shelter resident, and the recent assault on West 47th Street between 9th and 10th Avenues of a building superintendent.

Regarding public safety, DHS's consistent response was that "our responsibility is to our staff and clients' safety", "we cannot force anyone to accept mental health services" and "we are not an enforcement agency." The current situation presents a clear and present danger to the safety, health, and well-being of residents, visitors, and businesses in Hell's Kitchen, as well as the clients of the temporary shelters housed in neighborhood hotels. MCB4 requests DHS to answer the community's follow up questions and consider the Board's recommendations below.

MCB4 Questions & Recommendations

Vaccinations

- Are shelter clients reluctant to get vaccinated because they do not want to leave their current hotel settings? What can be done to address this issue?
- Ensure vaccinations are easily accessible by providing vaccinations on-site more than once a month
- Consider a partnership with MCB4 and Ryan Health Center to increase vaccination rates
- Provide creative incentives that are desirable for residents and staff to be vaccinated
- Collect and share vaccination data per site with MCB4 and community members
- Encourage shelter clients to receive vaccinations at Jacob Javits Center

Public Safety

- Address the public safety concerns of community members, specifically at the Skyline Hotel and NAICA site
- Address public urination near density reduction sites, for example, in front of the New York Public Library branch between 50th and 51st Streets on 10th Avenue, and other hot spot areas

Plans for Relocation Back to Congregate Settings

- What is the trigger point for shelter clients to return to congregate settings? What are the specific indicators DHS is looking for from the CDC, state and city health agencies?
- There has been discussion between the precinct councils, Council Speaker Corey Johnson's office and community organizations regarding two letters from DHS; one letter to shelter clients and one to providers. The letter discusses plans for the density reduction sites to be closed and for shelter clients to be transferred back to congregate settings, with a focus on Midtown, JFK, and Long Island City.
- MCB4 requests for DHS to send copies of the letter to the Board and to clarify the next steps and timeline regarding the plan for relocation.
- Include community board input in discussions for shelter clients to return to congregate settings
- Clarify if there is an end date for FEMA funding to the density reduction sites
- Outline a specific metric for shelter clients to return to congregate settings
- Address shelter client relocations in Midtown West, prioritizing areas near transit hubs
- Share a Covid-19 safety plan for residents and staff in congregate settings

Conclusion

MCB4 appreciates DHS’s collaboration in terms of the CAB meetings, continued engagement, accepting our requests to appear at the HHHS Committee meeting and responding to the community concerns by relocating residents in the Washington Jefferson and at the DoubleTree Hotels. However, we are over 14 months into the pandemic and rates of Covid-19 continue to decrease. Mayor de Blasio requested for City agencies to submit plans for return to work during May of 2021, including MCB4, and has widely reported that New York City is to open by July 1st.

It is critical that there be transparency and engagement with MCB4 around the phased plan for shelter clients to return to congregate settings and the vaccination plan. MCD4 currently has three congregate shelter sites with approximately 400 shelter beds, and it is necessary that we remain part of the process to maintain the stability of our existing residential neighborhoods.

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

Appendix A

May 20th, 2021 meeting of HHHS. 17 community members addressed the Committee.

1. Dana Lobell, husband who is a doctor, was physically assaulted on his way home from work. Asked DHS what were the next steps to help the people who need mental health support.
2. Kirk Gostkowski, Artistic Director of Chain Theatre on W36th Street near 8th Avenue, described activities on the street as being like an episode of *The Wire*, with drugs being run between hotels, and dealers with lookouts in case the police come. “I feel unsafe here on a daily basis. My colleague was followed leaving here and shoved repeatedly. Luckily, I was there and the woman ran into the shelter that’s on 37th Street. We are trying to rebuild and reopen here. We were spit at while on the street. We have to chain the front doors of our building shut to make sure people don’t come in and defecate on the floor in the lobby — which happens anytime that the building is open in the late night. . . Getting people together is our business and we haven’t been able to do that. I’m fighting here to survive with this little dream. We started 10 years ago and I can’t go through a summer of this. People will not come to my business if this is what they have to see every day and step over people and be harassed and shoved and threatened. I’m very scared for my personal safety.” Asked how many people need to be hurt before something’s done.
3. John Beck, General Manager of the Crowne Plaza and Even Hotel. “I have been at the hotel every day for over a year and have made friends with some of the residents in the shelters. As I speak to them over the last month, I continually ask, ‘when will you guys be moved back?’. They tell me “there’s no sense in me getting the shot because then I’ll have to move back.” John said he had heard this “from the five or six people that I speak to at least once or twice a week.”
4. Allen Marchetti, physician who has lived in the area since the 1980s, for more than 20 years. "I've been attacked twice in the past year, both by homeless people. I was very embarrassed as a doctor to be talking about this, because the homeless have their own issues. . . I understand how horrible it is to be a doctor in this area, when you are caring for these people. And when they attack you, it’s like ‘how did these people become my enemy and not my patients?’” Marchetti said DHS had “destroyed this neighborhood,” adding that he’d been in New York since the late 1980s. “I’ve never felt so unsafe. I’ve never been assaulted in my entire time in New York City.” Allen had also heard from two temporary hotel residents about their reluctance for vaccination. “I couldn’t believe it. Neither one of them wanted to get the vaccine because they would have to leave the area. Something is wrong with what DHS is doing. How many people have to be hurt? DHS, please just help us. Quit the metrics, quit all the BS and just help us. And at the same time, you could be helping these other people.”
5. Barrett Einaugler, asked about the vaccination process, the percentage of vaccines given to DHS staff, residents, street homeless, and residents of hotels.

6. Brian Weber, resident in W36st Street heard consistently that DHS will be guided by science, but to hear that there are barriers to vaccination is not acceptable. We need to remove barriers for anyone in shelters who wishes to be vaccinated, and it must be made more easily and readily accessible. We've heard of numerous assaults, provoked by those with mental health issues, the stressors are too great on our community and street homeless population.
7. Christopher S., resident of Clinton Housing for 35 years. It's hard to see people shoot up in front of you and drug dealers selling in broad daylight to homeless people on 9th Avenue. There's an issue that the DHS needs to handle properly.
8. John Chalice, resident of Hell's Kitchen. There's a lot of frustration around transparency with DHS, and people may be disincentivized to get a vaccine to stay in the hotels.
9. Steve C., DHS is paying hotels \$175/room while the market rate is \$90/room. That's a big waste of taxpayer money, the city should discontinue contracts and move people to less expensive hotels. Midtown Manhattan is the highest income generating area for the city, we should recover our income generating source at a minimum.
10. Jennifer Mallicote, resident of Chelsea. We have a homeless community that needs to be cared for as well, we need to come up with solutions . . . to bring them to services.
11. Serge Harnett, Director of 29th Street Neighborhood Association. Many residents are mentally ill and ex-convicts mostly in Hell's Kitchen and Midtown South. The summer months are fast approaching, currently many of these hotels are visited by 10-15 police and 1-2 ambulances per day. Oen facility on 29th Street has had an almost 30% increase in police and ambulance visits per day from March to April.
12. Sabrina Reveron, works for social services. Has been assaulted twice. We have to refocus our energy on why shelter clients do not want to go back to congregate shelters.
13. Elaine Korn, part of CB5 on the Board of Directors on W35th Street. Our doorman was assaulted, I walk daily on the street in fear, I have moved out of the apartment for a couple of months. When I came back, a homeless woman threw apples at my head. What's being done is not enough.
14. Christine Gorman, President of the W55th Street Block Association. Heard something about FEMA money being paid for the hotel shelters, which usually has an end date. When is the end date?
15. Devon Brooks, student government association, undergrad at John Jay College. Asked someone not to shoot up in front of my school. Surveyed the homeless in Clinton Park. Public urination site at public library in front of the Skyline (Columbus branch between 50th and 51st Street on 10th Avenue). Can DHS incentivize people to get vaccinated and go back to the congregate shelters?
16. Barbara Knecht, worked for homeless services in the 1980s, and has lived in Hell's Kitchen since 1988. It is not acceptable that we have this management problem, to serve people who are experiencing homelessness. What will it take to get the mayor and commissioner to hear what you are hearing in the community?

17. Barbara Blair, President of the Garment District Alliance. There's a huge amount of distrust in the nation for taking the vaccine. Need a plan B for those who do not take the vaccine. We cannot have this concentration near transit hubs and where there are pre-existing conditions. There cannot be a concentration of temporary homeless shelters in the area.

Appendix B

Assaults involving shelter residents housed in neighborhood hotels used as temporary shelters.

18. 3/19/21; Male (20s, community resident) assaulted by female shelter client (operated by ICL, Hilton Garden Inn, 326 W37th St) and her boyfriend while he was trying to enter his home. When the victim ran into the shelter for assistance, five security guards denied assistance to the victim, told him to call 911, and claimed the assailant was not a resident, It was confirmed later that she was. Police arrested both assailants (on either 3/19 or 3/20). Victim was treated for injuries at the hospital. After the assailant's arrest, she was returned to that shelter. It is Manhattan Community Board 4's understanding that the client in question has been transferred to a different location. Due to subsequent threats and harassment towards the victim of the initial assault, this is being investigated as a possible hate crime.
19. 3/25/21; Slashing in front of the Skyline Hotel (operated by ACACIA, 725 10th Ave) involving two shelter male clients from that site.
20. 3/29/21; Woman (Vilma Kari) assaulted at 360 W43rd St. Assailant is a shelter client at Four Points by Sheraton (operated by NAICA, 326 W40th St operated)
21. 3/30/21; Stabbing/Slashing in front of Marriott (BVSJ, 338 W36th St) Shelter. Incident does not appear to involve shelter residents of BVSJ
22. 3/31/21; Assault in front of Hilton Garden Inn, (ICL, 326 W37th St). Both assailant (Female) and victim (Female) are sheltered at Hilton Garden Inn.
23. 4/2/2021; A 73-year-old super on the block, was assaulted by a man believed to be between the ages of 28 and 30, at around 9:30am on West 47th Street between 9th and 10th Avenues. The assailant was wearing a reddish kangaroo pouch jacket with white tie cords, gray sweatpants, black boots and a black and camel colored baseball cap. Out of the blue, the assailant began running towards Regis Moore, the super, and then viciously slugged Regis in the gut, throwing him to the ground. The man returned to retrieve his hat spewing profanities towards Regis. We understand the assailant has not been caught. Mr. Moore was taken to Mount Sinai where it was discovered he suffered multiple injuries from a fractured shoulder to several broken ribs amongst others. There was news coverage of this attack on the [Post](#) and the NBC Local station and it was aired on Sunday evening, April 4.
24. 5/03/21; A female attacker approached a 31-year-old Asian woman and asked her to take off her mask, then struck the victim with a hammer on W42nd St near 9th Ave. The victim and her friend wrestled the hammer from the assailant during the confrontation. Victim was treated at NYU Langone Hospital for her injuries.
25. 5/18/21; At W43rd and 11th Avenue a man was punched, bit and told to "go back to China" by a Skyline Hotel shelter client (assailant arrested 5/20).

