

SAFETY COMMITTEE  
and  
AD HOC COMMITTEE ON HOMELESSNESS ISSUES

JOINT MEETING

FEBRUARY 24, 2021

Via ZOOM  
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Discussion with block residents on concerns surrounding the 22nd Street Shelter  
Note- conversation has been paraphrased.  
  
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Cynthia Felix (meeting chair) –  
welcomed all to discuss issues raised by our community regarding Sleep Inn Gowanus shelter at 22<sup>nd</sup> Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

Yuri Sanchez (DHS)-  
Sleep Inn Gowanus was changed from families with children to single men in October 2020 due to the need for more men's shelters and fewer family.

Cynthia Felix-  
Background information- starting in Nov 2020 block residents noticed deterioration of safety, and increase in theft, drug paraphernalia, quality of life and verbal threats.

Cesar Zuniga-  
Not just that block. CB7 has history of working with shelters and homeless people. We want to help. We are Inclusive. We need to separate homelessness from other issues. None-the-less, there has been a HUGE increase in complaints.

Michael Burgos of the African American Planning Commission (who manages Sleep Inn Gowanus shelter)-  
We work in harmony with community. We are just hearing some of these complaints for the first time. We strongly enforce policies.

Kimberly Jones director of Operations at Sleep Inn Gowanus-  
We have reputation for educating our clients in importance of not disrupting the community. We do internal and external rounds. We immediately address community concerns as soon as we are made aware of them.

Rene Reyes from the block-

Our block is light Manufacturing with a few residential buildings. The number of shelter residents is equal to or greater than existing residents. Before, there was low pedestrian traffic. After the hotel became a family shelter there was more foot traffic, and some issues were noted with drug use and vehicle break-ins. Occasionally domestic violence would occur. But we still felt safe.

However, in the past months there has been an increase in issues on the block. There have been complaints of aggression and Intimidation by six separate individuals from the hotel. Block residents feel unsafe especially at night. NCOs are a great support but understaffed. We need more checks and balances and consequences. One shelter resident was caught stealing packages, returned to the shelter and then threatened us. Block residents have not been engaged. What is the plan for the hotel usage?

Daniel Murphy and wife (did not get her name) from the block:

The shelter does not have good relationship with police.

Are shelter residents getting the help they need?

We do not feel safe.

The system does not work. We always need to look over our shoulder. People from the shelter have threatened me. They threatened my neighbor saying, "I'm going to f\*\*\*ing kill you and your dog", in front of his child! while another neighbor ran into the hotel and pleaded with the shelter to help us. There was no response.

A few feet away from the hotel parking lot the street is littered with hypos, beer and vodka bottles, people are urinating. We do not feel safe, we have been threatened. There is no security presence beyond the front door. We've had to put in a security system. There are no repercussions. A convicted rapist has been placed a block from a school. The community should be told. The entire system is completely broken. Why are there so many shelters in Sunset Park?

I support shelters and mental health facilities. I tried to reach-out to include shelter residents, I tried to employ some at my business.

But there is a lot of fighting, it is almost constant. There was a man robbed at gunpoint on our street.

Yuri-

We did transfer the package theft client.

Daniel-

He was returned for a day--long enough to threaten neighbors.

Someone is making a fortune. There is no community outreach. I fear something really bad is bound to happen.

Yuri-

We do partner with communities. Regarding sex offenders—NY State has a right to shelter law. We are legally and morally responsible to shelter homeless people and we cannot discriminate based on prior criminal record. The distinction for a sex offender is if they have a restriction. If they do not have a restriction, they can live within 1,000 feet of a school. We cannot discriminate based on criminal background. Persons with criminal records have a right to shelter.

Daniel wife- Shouldn't we be told?

Yuri- We must respect client privacy.

Daniel- is there a move out date for the shelter? The whole system is broken.

Yuri- The Mayor's plan is to transition out of hotels in 2023. Please call shelter managers with issues.

Jeremy Laufer – city-wide policies are beyond the scope of this meeting.

Jason Smith-

There are a handful of shelter residents who are not good neighbors. I was the man who was threatened by the package thief who was allowed to return to the shelter. This man was put back on our block for a week not a day. We need to feel safe! Can't we work together?

Information keeps changing. It is not just this block. This is drastically unfair for all involved. There are not enough resources. People with violent backgrounds should not be so close to schools. We are overburdened by so many shelters! The hotel owners are making a ton of money! More support services are needed!

Edward Cerna, mayor's office-

Let's watch our language. Let's lower temperature. Phrases like "Dumped on" "Burden" are charged language. Housing the homeless in hotels is hard. We are building shelters locally, so homeless can live in their communities.

Karen Rolnick

The mission statement for the Homeless Committee is, "To ensure that homeless people in our district get the support and services they need, while also ensuring that the presence of shelters does not negatively impact safety or quality of life in our neighborhood. Clearly this is a balancing act.

Hotels were allowed to go up here due to a glitch in the zoning laws. Though the city has attempted to close that loophole, the hotels are here (or being built). When COVID hit, it caused a lot of disruption to the already over-burdened shelter system.

A note about rapists, pedophiles and other criminals—they can and do live in homes as well. If they are in a shelter at least they have some oversight.

George Cardonna:

Why do we have more shelters? Let the rapists live on your block! Feed them on your block! Shelter managers are only responsible for first 100 ft. in front of their premises. In one of my offices on 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. @ 34 and 35 Streets, a woman had a knife pulled on her. Another woman came into my office for protection because other homeless women were harassing her. There are lots of package thefts. The perpetrators are released, there are no repercussions. Why are they here? There are needles on 60<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> and car break-ins. There are homeless people sitting in front of businesses, saying "Give me money and I'll move". They don't listen to security guards. Shoplifting has increased

Steven Halin-

We are empathetic. We care. Councilman Menchaca isn't concerned, he has no response. We have heard all the evidence of what is going on. What can we do now? Summer won't be pretty. Something bad is going to happen. It's a two-way street. When there were women and children in the shelter it was fine. When it changed to men only, the block deteriorated right away. What specifically, besides our calling the cops every single day, can be done? There are no consequences. We are using emotional language because we are emotional! These are our families and we do not feel safe! I can no longer walk my dog at night!

NCO Danial Green, to DHS-

For the past 2 or 3 build-a-block meetings, the shelters have been the biggest topic. There are a lot of complaints of package theft, public intoxication, loitering etc. We do not issue summonses for small offenses because people who are so poor that they are living in a shelter probably don't have the money to pay a summons. We try to use education and encouragement and we try to talk to them. This is often met with aggression.

Since Jan 25<sup>th</sup> of this year, 134 22<sup>nd</sup> Street has had 39 911 calls! These Include calls for help, EDP jobs, disputes and assaults in progress. I never get a response from DHS. Mike, the shelter manager is always there and keeps me in the loop. We don't want to arrest people for minor offenses, but that doesn't mean they are OK. What can we (all) do to help?

Yuri: I am the point of contact. I will attend next build a block if possible and I will send an associate if I can't make it. We have a Good Neighbor Policy.

Mike Burbos African American Planning Commission-

Call me, you have my number. Behind the scenes, case managers meet with men several times a week and refer them to community-based orgs for substance abuse programs, psych evaluation, counseling, therapy, medication management etc. and assistance in finding permanent housing.

Kimberly Jones-

We cannot allow the general public into the shelter but are happy to meet with you. We understand your concern. We do rounds. We will go to the corner. We redirect our clients.

Daniel Murphy-

If you had said that you've failed, and you will step things up, I would be more hopeful. But the fact that you're claiming that you are doing your job as expected is worrisome! Can we get additional security?

Kimberly Jones: we will extend rounds to the end of the block.

Jeremy Laufer: can you post contact info on outside of shelter?

Daniel Murphy- If you can post security details outside on street it will help this street. It would make us feel safer.

John Johnson

Has CB7 looked at Fair Share provision in city charter?

Jeremy Laufer:

City is under emergency order so fair share does not apply.

Yuri- Not sure.

John Johnson

Who is instructing you not to give summonses for misdemeanors?

Barbara Lee-

I'm near the 24<sup>th</sup> Street shelter. Since COVID there has been more loitering, and it feels dangerous at night. Curfews are not enforced. Businesses are leaving because of theft. This was not like this before 2016. Yes, we are in a crisis, but we should not have to live in fear. We need to not blame the [homeless] people but blame the process.

Cynthia Gonzalez-

I saw this for myself, the situation is dire and real! I saw drug-dealing, loud behavior aggressive behavior. Are the people getting into permanent housing? These folks do not meet the income requirements for low-income housing.

We all knew this was coming when the hotels went up ten years ago. Something is radically wrong--someone's life was threatened! There is no housing for these people. We need to put pressure on the next administration. 63,000 in shelters! We need to build housing!

Jeremy Laufer; 13 years ago, our local councilman, Bill De Blasio, warned us about the hotels/ shelters being a problem.

Rachel Carp

Who should we call instead of cops?

Yuri – call provider. 24 hrs. a day 7 days a week.

Pat Ruiz to Yuri-

Do you document these concerns? Are you hearing us? Do you keep statistics?

Yuri- I work closely with Jeremy. I take seriously any complaint I get. I am not law enforcement. Folks should go to CB7 not us. Yes. I am taking notes. Will I make the promise to follow up on nebulous complaints? No, but I am here to bridge that gap.

Cynthia,

How often does DHS review needs and re-assign shelter designations (family, all men etc.).

Yuri- I will get back to you.

Yvonne Ballard DHS

I Apologize for the threatening behavior. We will move folks who do not adhere to the good neighbor policy out. Everyone has a right to shelter, we cannot discriminate based on prior convictions. We will move clients who are not good neighbors. We do provide services to clients. We live in a world where you cannot force anyone to do something they don't want to do. Our job is to get people to accept services.

Rene Smith-

These are rote and disingenuous answers from DHS. We were told this was a temporary shelter due to COVID, now we learn otherwise. If this will continue until 2023, what do we do until then? We aren't getting answers. We need a plan!

John Johnson-

We should ask the comptroller to review this shelter, do they meet qualifications in Vendex review?

Cynthia G-

Block residents' lives have been dramatically changed, they may be vulnerable for mental health issues due to constant stress and fear. There are only a few individuals not being kept in check. Now mental health issues are spreading. What housing are these people being moved permanently to?

Jeremy - out of purview.

Yuri – The AAPCI needs to answer question. We do have move-outs. We use vouchers. Housing specialists are assigned to each client.

Karen Rolnick-

The average length of stay in the shelter system is about a year. People are moved to permanent housing.

We have quite a cluster of shelters in a small area. Would it be possible to get an extra security team to circulate between the shelters?

On 34<sup>th</sup> Street, the shelter installed a bench so residents could be outdoors and sit down. This worked to keep shelter residents off stoops and street corners. Should that be considered?

Silence

Rene-

We were told that onsite services at this shelter do not include mental health services. Can we add these services at this site?

Cynthia Felix,

Thank you for your input. There is a lot of passion because it is our neighborhood, and we love it! We need more transparency. We need an action plan. We are sympathetic to those who have lost their homes, but we should be safe! We do not know if needs are being met due to lack of transparency. Can we keep a tally of complaints? We need better statistics. We will work together.

Cesar-

Ditto Cynthia. To our neighbors, please continue to engage. I know it is frustrating. There are many truths and conflicting emotions, which are all valid.

Yuri - I sent responses to your questions and copies of our Good Neighbor policy.

Jeremy- will distribute.

Alexa, do these policies apply to all sites? We need to look at all the shelters, not just this one.

Cynthia brought the meeting to a close.