



Community Board 12 - Manhattan Washington Heights & Inwood

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Richard R. Lewis, Chairperson
Ebenezer Smith, District Manager

May 7, 2019

Hon. Steven Bank
Commissioner
NYC Department of Homeless Services
33 Beaver Street, 17th floor
New York, NY 10004

Re: Opposition to the Planned DHS Men's Homeless Shelter at 286 Audubon Avenue with the Recommendations on Size, Site Relocation, Family Shelter Choice, and Acquisition of a New Service Provider

Dear Commissioner Bank:

At its General Meeting on Tuesday, April 23, 2019, with a vote of 26 in favor, 6 opposed, 3 abstentions, 3 not voting, Community Board 12 Manhattan, passed a resolution **opposing** the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) planned Men's Homeless Shelter at 286 Audubon Avenue. At a board initiated Public Hearing on April 11, 2019 local residents, electeds and many stakeholders overwhelmingly testified that they were are not satisfied with the size, scope, homeless housing needs and the accommodations provided in the space at its proposed location. While the community for years has shown compassion and outreach with our homeless populations and their needs there was considerable lack of evidence given at that meeting that would merit whether DHS's designated service provider could offer full-time, continuous and desperately needed services to shelter residents and the community without extensive outsourcing and intense scrutiny.

In addition to our opposition to the DHS planned Men's Homeless Shelter Community Board 12, Manhattan makes the following recommendations and options given the fact that while we embrace the homeless in our area and we also want to do the best we can with dignity in this special time in their lives rather than warehousing them in the proposed general, non-transitional shelter without individual client rooms or units with walls:

- Downsize the planned number of 175 men to a much smaller size facility that will accommodate either 50 families with children or 50 adult families, including seniors;
- Revisit the current construction at this location and change the architectural renderings to allow for apartment units for these families with adequate bathroom and kitchen facilities – in fact, build extremely very low income supportive housing that's permanently affordable such as now being recommended by the City Council in Intro 1211 that allows HPD term sheet amendments and set aside of units for a homeless population with rental assistance and supportive job training and counselling and tax abatements for developers who receive city funding;
- DHS needs to show better respect and work directly with the community, stakeholders, electeds and the community board itself to acquire future sites and to better mediate and balance the targeted oversaturation of the current array of homeless shelter or cluster sites and other drug treatment, rehabilitation services located east of Broadway as opposed to willfully ignoring and then expecting us to become dutiful community partners as was done in this project;
- The community board expresses its lack of confidence in HELP USA the DHS designated service provider in this project and requests a new public vetting and full disclosure on any new homeless service partners selected to work in our district and one that will also provide sufficient professional careers and jobs for our residents.

Whereas, It is no secret that our city, state and our nation are in the midst of a homeless crises that never seems to go away despite billions upon billions of tax payers dollars spent over the past two decades and one that perpetuates a shelter system concentrated in zip codes of poorer neighborhoods; and

Whereas, At the same time we are facing an affordable housing crises due to the lack of early and preventive legislative responses so that now we need to catch up and build at high developer costs over 400,00 permanently affordable units with income set asides, deeper levels of zoning term sheets, rent and tax subsidies and preserve and protect the less than a million rent regulated units still left during this decade by ending vacancy decontrol and safeguarding the renewals of some 265,00 preferential rent leaseholders; and

Whereas, Homelessness in New York City in recent years, has reached the highest levels since the Great Depression of the 1930's and according to the **Coalition for the Homeless** and large agreement with data from the **NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS)** and the federal government's agency 's **Housing and Urban Development (HUD)** there were roughly over 60,000 homeless people, including some 16,000 homeless families with some 21,000 homeless children, sleeping each night in the New York City municipal shelter system in February 2019 and where families that make up nearly three-quarters of the homeless shelter population; and

Whereas, The DHS reports show that roughly 133,000 different homeless men, women, and children slept in the municipal shelter system during fiscal year 2018 that also included over 46,000 different homeless NYC children while other reports show that the number of homeless New Yorkers sleeping each night in municipal shelters is now "74 percent higher than it was ten years ago and the number of homeless single adults is 150 percent higher"; and

Whereas, Major studies and surveys have identified that the primary cause of homelessness, particularly among families is lack of affordable housing, there are other key factors may trigger homelessness: eviction; doubling-up or severely overcrowded housing, domestic violence, job loss and hazardous housing; and

Whereas, Our state constitution affords anyone the "right to shelter" thousands of unsheltered homeless people ('street homeless') still sleep on New York City streets, parks, in the subway system, highway underpasses and in other public and private spaces. There is no accurate measurement of New York City's street homeless and recent government agency surveys significantly underestimate that number especially the large majority of street homeless living with mental illness or other severe health problems; and

Whereas, The de Blasio Administration faced with mounting criticism of no change in the direction of the city's homelessness had little choice and sought more pre-emptive solutions and released in February of 2018 a comprehensive plan and report called "**Turning the Tide of Homelessness in New York City**," detailing efforts on how to combat the rise in homelessness by closing the use of cluster units (individual apartments in buildings that usually have rent-paying tenants in other apartments, with limited or no social services on site) and commercial hotels to warehouse homeless persons; and

Whereas, A necessary part of this plan is to acquire and rehabilitate cluster site buildings or other properties and convert them into permanent affordable housing through long-term regulatory agreements between the owners and HPD where homeless families will be offered rental assistance, services and support to help them learn to live independently and rent stabilized leases there was no early and major effort on the part of the administration in this plan to aggressively engage and reach out to community boards and stakeholders for site acquisition or service provider assistance; and

Whereas, On Friday February 22nd, 2019 and after the close of business Community Board 12, Manhattan suddenly received a 'dead of the night' email and a phone call informing us of a planned men's homeless shelter for 175 individuals in a renovated parking garage at 286 Audubon Avenue (B/L = 2153/47, near West 179th Street) and we were asked after the fact to become "community partners" to sell this plan to our constituents and where from searching public records it appears this project was begun in early 2018 with signoffs from almost everyone save community stakeholders: DHS, HPD, the building owner, architect, contractor, the Department of Buildings and the service provider, HELP USA; and

Whereas, The proposed men's shelter according to the testimony of DHS is now planned as a 'general shelter' that will temporarily house residents who have been screened for mental issues and substance abuse problems and will offer a wide variety of support services including job training by their designated service provider HELP USA with a planned opening date sometime in the summer; and

Whereas, DHS claims there are "425 households composed of 862 individuals from CD 12 in shelters across the city, more DHS clients from CD 12 in their system than there are beds available in CD 12 to shelter them and there are now some 409 individuals sheltered in CD 12, including [113 to 120] individuals in one commercial hotel facility that will be phased out"; and

Whereas, The community and local stakeholders were not involved in the site selection, the type of shelter or the acquisition of the service providers a series of four meetings were called by the Community Board 12, M in April, 2019 for discovery purposes and that included the crafting of a 130 questionnaire that solicited DHS, HELP USA, the landlord, the contractor and the architect for answers on this project, a Public Hearing, and this resolution on our findings and recommendations; and

Whereas, At the Public Hearing residents, mostly an immigrant population stated that while they embraced our homeless population and wanted to help them they felt disrespected by DHS who just wanted to continue their routine practice of dropping shelters in the dead of night without consulting the community such that residents now feared some dire consequences for the safety of their families and themselves and did not want this type of shelter in their neighborhood; and

Whereas, At the Public Hearing attendees also spoke and expressed the following facts and the effects on their family, friends, seniors, children and themselves: that this area is oversaturated with enough social services and homeless problems, such as DHS shelters, cluster sites, and commercial hotel rentals, group homes, a major and large NYS Psychiatric Institute and research center, large roaming street and shelter homeless populations, particularly at the West 168th Street subway station and nearby local streets, with arrests and physical fights with the NYPD and Transit Police, the Port Authority Bus Terminal at West 179th Street, our large city parks and many playgrounds in the area, heavy syringe usage and disposals at the West 181 Street #1 station (some 500 needle

cleanups per week from the tracks to the platform level reported by the NYTA and the Transit Police), drug rehab and chemical dependency clinics (HIGHBRIDGE CLINIC OTP [NYS OASAS] - Outpatient Methadone Maintenance and Treatment Services - Chemical Dependency with 350 Program Capacity at 500 West 180 Street and MI Panamericana Medical Services – 311 Audubon Avenue) and HARM programs, the need to close an entire greenstreet/park (Duarte Square Park) by the Department of Parks and the 33rd Precinct for over a year at West 170 Street and Broadway/St. Nicholas Avenue due to heavy homeless gatherings and drug, heavy police activity at known encampments and hangouts, reports of public sexual activity on Broadway, nudity, urination and human scat on public streets, narcotics trafficking and use, larceny and robbery, abusive language, aggressive panhandling and menacing, a fire destroying parts of the landmarked Highbridge Water Tower by a homeless encampment, constant and large meetings with the board's Public Safety Committee, Sector C Neighborhood Coordinating Officers (NCO)/NYPD, and the 34th and 33rd Precinct Council meetings and constant complaints by neighborhood businesses and their customers of street homeless harassment; and

Whereas, Similar concerns have been voiced at other community district hearings: Sunset Park, Brooklyn, Maspeth, Queens, College Point Queens, Kips Bay and Murray Hill in Manhattan, Blissville in Queens, Ozone Park, Queens, and the same poor, incomplete and misleading answers and denial for information have been the pattern for these DHS meetings, anchored by almost the same teams and each prospective non-profit service provider where no contract has been issued to them; and

Whereas, At Community Board 12, Manhattan's Public Hearing the service provider a HELP USA was unprepared to give clear, concise and honest information and data, but instead gave social philosophy to explain their accomplishments with homelessness as they presented only one example of their organization's success. They stated they had great experience with "this same type of shelter" and had heard the same kind of negative comments prior to the opening of the West 107th Street Shelter and how the community had since embraced them. However, when asked what type of shelter they were promoting they indicated it was a women's shelter, not the men's shelter of record and the public and at least one elected official's staff member who testified felt it was "disingenuous" to flout this misinformation; and

Whereas, At the Public Hearing there was some concern that HELP USA became defensive for failing to disclose a very recent federal EEOC sexual harassment settlement for \$150,000, the death of an infant housed at a Hamilton Heights shelter that HELP USA was the service provider and where DHS had yearly backlogs of repairs requests to process (cited in a report by the NYC Comptroller), a worker's report of bad job counselling and the fact the Shelter was founded by now Governor Andrew Cuomo some thirty years ago and where his sister is board chair; and

Whereas, At the Public Hearing concerns were raised why there were little to no shelters placed in non-distressed areas west of Broadway with higher incomes as opposed to distressed areas east of Broadway with lower incomes and where too many such facilities are already located and as a consequence limits that neighborhood the same chance to develop and prosper economically; and

Whereas, The estimated job cost for the renovation of 286 Audubon Avenue is \$2,242,500 according to a job permit applied for in January 16, 2018 and granted on June 8th, 2018 by the Department of Buildings and two months later the landlord (286 Audubon Holdings, LLC) secured a consolidated loan by leveraging two other nearby garage properties (528 West 162nd Street and 554 West 174 Street) from existing Manufacturers and Trade Trust Company and New York Community Bank mortgages with a lien of \$4,125,000 dated August 16, 2018 and while all of this was happening no information has been provided on how this site was selected or when the RFP was developed; and

Whereas, At the Public Hearing there was no support for DHS's planned men's homeless shelter by Congressman Adriano Espaillat, NYS Senator Robert Jackson, NYS Assembly member Carmen De LaRosa, Assembly member Al Taylor, and Councilmember Ydanis Rodriguez they all felt that the community was disrespected by not having any involvement in this plan from the very beginning or continuously; and

Whereas, Community Board 12, Manhattan has not received clear and accurate answers to the 130 questions, developed at its April 5th meeting and submitted to DHS, HELP USA, the contractor, the architect and the owner - particularly answers to the environmental control study; and

Whereas, Community Board 12, Manhattan's residents and electeds are not satisfied with the size, scope, homeless housing needs and the accommodations provided in the space at its proposed location (286 Audubon Avenue) as well as the lack of evidence that would merit the community's support that the DHS designated service provider will be able to offer those full-time services desperately needed by the residents and the areas it will be serving without extensive outsourcing and intense scrutiny, **now therefore be it**

Resolved, Community Board 12, Manhattan is opposed to the size of the planned men's homeless shelter and recommends that DHS downsize the planned number of 175 men to a much smaller size facility that will accommodate either 50 families with children or 50 adult families, including seniors; and be it

Resolved, Community Board 12, Manhattan is opposed to the lack of individual apartment units in the facility under conversion and recommends DHS to revisit the current construction at this location and change the architectural renderings to allow for apartment units for these families with adequate bathroom and kitchen facilities that construction professionals advise can be done in each unit as opposed to open barracks with bunkbeds or side by side cot arrangement so that residents in this facility may be eligible to when they find stable jobs for rental assistance and other benefits as part of the "Turning the Tide of Homelessness Plan"; and be it

Resolved, Community Board 12, Manhattan recommends that DHS to work with stakeholders, the community, electeds and the board itself current to acquire future sites West of Broadway to better mediate and balance the oversaturation of current array of shelters located East of Broadway; and be it

Resolved, Community Board 12, Manhattan does not have sufficient confidence from the evidence we have read, testimony heard, available performance reviews with the DHS designated service provider, HELP USA and requests a new public vetting and full disclosure on any new homeless service partners selected to work in our district and one that will provide sufficient professional careers and jobs for our residents; and finally be it

Hon. Steven Bank

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Resolved Community Board 12, Manhattan is of the opinion that shelters, cluster homes and commercial faculty rentals, Special One-Time Assistance (SOTA), and similar programs are no solution to the homeless problem, waste billions of dollars and may even exacerbate the crisis we face with constant recidivism from one shelter to the next or street homelessness until we build extremely very low income supportive housing and affordable housing such as now being recommended by the City Council in Intro 1211 that allows HPD term amendments for a 15% set aside of units for a homeless population with rental assistance and supportive job training and counselling and tax abatements for developers who receive city funding with a projection of 30,000 units being built in the next ten years

Sincerely,



Richard R. Lewis
Chairperson

PS: Community Board 12, Manhattan's 130 Questions on this proposed shelter and mentioned in this resolution letter available on request.

cc: Hon. Andrew Cuomo, Governor
Hon. Bill de Blasio, Mayor
Hon. Public Advocate
Hon. Scott M. Stringer, Comptroller
Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Borough President
Hon. Adriano Espaillat, Congress Member
Hon. Benjamin S. Carson, Secretary HUD
Hon. Lynne M. Patton, HUD Administrator
Dr. Herminia Palacio, Deputy Mayor HHS
Hon. Michael Hein, Acting Commissioner, OTDA

Hon. Brian Benjamin, State Senator
Hon. Robert Jackson, State Senator
Hon. Alfred Taylor, Assembly Member
Hon. Carmen De La Rosa, Assembly Member
Hon. Ydanis Rodriguez, Council Member
Hon. Mark Levine, Council Member
Mr. Thomas Hameline, President HELP USA
Samuel E. Miller HUD Homeless Coordinator
Brett Wise, HUD Region Director
Cheryl Contento, Deputy Commissioner, OTDA