



August 28, 2020

Attn: Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

CC: Governor Andrew Cuomo
Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer
Council Member Helen Rosenthal
Assembly Member Linda Rosenthal
Congressperson Jerry Nadler
Senator Chuck Schumer
Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
HRA Commissioner Steven Banks

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

We write to you as members of the Upper West Side community who are concerned about issues of safety, human rights, and racial injustice in our neighborhood. We are residents, parents, patrons, and property and business owners. We all have a stake in the safety and vibrancy of our neighborhood, which is reeling from the ongoing personal and economic devastation of COVID-19. **We write because we are deeply disturbed by a rise in inflammatory, dehumanizing rhetoric and incitements to violence against vulnerable New Yorkers who are living on the streets or in shelters.** In particular, we are concerned about calls to remove Project Renewal, Help USA, and the Center for Urban Community Services from three Upper West Side hotels, without identifying any safe or reasonable alternative location.

We believe that *every* resident of the Upper West Side deserves to feel safe and secure in our neighborhood. Many of us also have children whose safety is our paramount priority. **Safety and compassion are not mutually exclusive.** All individuals who share our neighborhood—whether permanently or temporarily—deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of their living situation, race, medical condition, or economic means.

Like many cities, New York City's efforts to contain COVID-19 included the relocation of homeless shelter residents and staff to hotels that otherwise would have remained vacant.



This decision was based on public health experts' warnings that densely populated shelters would hasten the spread of the pandemic across our city. While the emergency nature of the move made the initial relocation bumpy, it is important to remember that it was made with one crucial concern in mind: the safety of New Yorkers. A COVID-19 outbreak that could stem from crowded shelters would harm not just vulnerable shelter residents but all who may subsequently be exposed.

In reaction to these relocations, some individuals have posted dehumanizing photographs of people they presume to be shelter residents on social media, or publicly called them "creatures" and "animals." Some have confronted and harassed them for inhabiting public space. Some have suggested we criminalize homelessness, ship shelter residents out to "airport hotels" in other people's neighborhoods. Some have even suggested placing dog feces on public benches so shelter residents cannot sit in the center medians of our streets. We, the undersigned, do not agree with these efforts to demonize or stigmatize the homeless population. **We wish to discourage the city from taking rash action to placate a few loud voices spreading alarmist misinformation.** These voices do not speak for our community at large, and they are an affront to our neighborhood's history of open mindedness, tolerance, and inclusion.

Those speaking out loudly to dehumanize shelter residents on the Upper West Side have inflamed fear and anger by spreading false rumors. Here are just a few examples:

- Reports that a Category 3 sexual offender was allegedly moved to the Lucerne Hotel were unfounded, and based on an inaccuracy in the database. Opponents of the shelters have significantly exaggerated the number of offenders located at the hotels and focused exclusively on the risk of abuse by strangers, when the sad truth is that [93% of reported child sexual assailants](#) are either family members or trusted acquaintances.
- With no evidence, some initially blamed local homeless individuals for a knife attack at the West 72nd Street subway station; in reality, the man that police identified on video and apprehended lives in Queens.
- [NYPD statistics](#) disprove rumors that crime is on the rise since the shelters relocated to UWS hotels. In fact, the "Major 7" crimes in the 20th precinct are down 9.5% year-over-year, and 9.8% if we look at the last month alone. It is 311 calls and complaints to police that have surged.
- Opponents of the temporary shelters have also spread false information about the shelter population and the organizations providing care for them. Individuals in the shelter system are seeking and have already accepted a form of help. Many are employed. All have assigned case workers who help them access mental health services, addiction counseling, and, most importantly, aid in applying for permanent affordable housing, of which there is a devastating shortage.



We recognize that these services may be imperfect: the city's budget is stretched thin and pandemic restrictions have limited access to many in-person group services. But shelter residents are not responsible for these systemic problems, nor can these problems be solved by moving the shelters elsewhere. **The services shelter residents receive would be identical in an ordinary shelter environment or in another hotel location**, and they would be subject to the same limitations as long as COVID-19 remains a threat.

Concerned neighbors who think shelter residents are not receiving sufficient services should by all means advocate on their behalf or donate directly for their assistance. We believe that true concern would be expressed in the form of kindness and assistance rather than harassment and dehumanization. Even as shelter critics claim to care about safety, some have made shelter residents and those who try to support them feel unsafe by confronting and intimidating them in person. Cyber harassment has also become a significant problem: some opponents of the shelters have gone so far as to post the names, descriptions, home and work addresses, and children's school locations of those who support the shelters on social media.

This rhetoric and behavior is weakening the Upper West Side and threatening our potential economic recovery. Our neighborhood, whose reputation for inclusiveness and diversity has long attracted both residents and visitors, is increasingly being portrayed as a crime-riddled bastion of intolerance, potentially harming local businesses and deterring homebuyers. In a recent *New York Times* [article](#), one restaurant owner complained that it is not an uptick of homeless people that is hurting his business; it is those spreading lies—and thereby inciting anger and fear—about shelter residents.

The scapegoating of the shelters as the sole cause of all neighborhood ills requires that we overlook both current facts and recent history. Many of the issues currently impacting the Upper West Side existed long before shelter residents were relocated here. Home sale prices had been declining since 2018, and astronomical rents had shuttered many businesses. Homelessness and addiction are both likely to increase in times of economic crisis. In addition to this, the population living on the streets—distinct from the shelter population—has become more visible due to the closures of day programs, subways, and libraries where these individuals might otherwise spend their time. **These are major structural problems that New York City must address holistically. They will not be solved by moving shelter services to someone else's neighborhood, near someone else's children.**

The truth is that the Upper West Side, like our entire beautiful city, has been battered by COVID-19 and the resultant economic damage. But we are strong. The vibrancy and resilience of our neighborhood remains while we wait for better times ahead. We can work together to make sure these better times come. We can help one another. We must refuse the temptation to place blame at the feet of vulnerable individuals. **We stand in our values and our long history of being an inclusive and welcoming community to say that those railing against the shelters while claiming to represent the Upper West Side do not speak for us.**

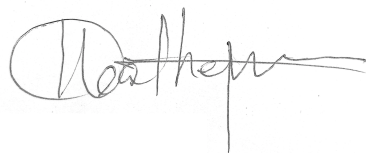


We urge the de Blasio administration to stay resolved in its attempt to protect all New Yorkers from the spread of COVID-19, as well as to ensure the rights of *all* residents of our community to live free of harassment and dehumanization. Decisions about shelter locations must be made according to evidence-based public health recommendations, not political pressure. **We call on the Department of Homeless Services to allow shelter operations to remain in hotels throughout the city—including our neighborhood—until public health experts determine that their use is no longer needed.** Finally, we encourage city officials to speak out to combat the spread of misinformation about the shelters and to work in partnership with Upper West Side stakeholders on permanent solutions to the housing crisis.

Sincerely,



Corinne Low
Co-founder, UWS Open Hearts Initiative



Heather Gunn-Rivera
Co-founder, UWS Open Hearts Initiative

On behalf of 476 UWS Residents, Teachers, and Business Owners

Co-signed:

Open New York

Coalition for the Homeless

helpNYC

Neighbors Together

Human.NYC

Homelessness Services United

Mutual Aid NYC Housing Team

Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center

Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen

Columbia Human Rights Law Review

Vocal NY

224 Other Concerned Citizens

33 Members of Related Organizations

See full list at uwsstrong.org

