



September 10, 2020

The Honorable Bill de Blasio  
Mayor of the City of New York  
City Hall  
New York, New York 10007

Dear Mr. Mayor,

When the COVID-19 pandemic spread to the U.S. earlier this year, our city once again bore the unwanted mantle of “ground zero” in a national crisis that will forever change the way we live. We are now at a time when, after far too many deaths and far too much suffering, the infection rate appears to be remaining low, and there is hope of a slow and careful return to some level of normalcy. Whatever success we have had in bringing down the infection rate was achieved by acting with rationality and compassion, and by adhering to public health guidance.

We are thus deeply troubled by your recent announcement that the City will begin to move homeless New Yorkers out of the Lucerne Hotel and the Long Island City Plaza Hotel, and by your comments suggesting that further such moves are planned in the near future.

Our primary concern is that your decision to transfer these individuals out of these hotels was very clearly a capitulation to the political pressure brought by some well-resourced members of the Upper West Side community. This is a complete reversal of the City’s approach to the pandemic to date: make decisions based on the facts, based on the need to protect the lives of the most vulnerable among us, and based on guidance from public health agencies.

You yourself tweeted on August 26<sup>th</sup>, “Let the doctors and scientists do their jobs. LIVES ARE ON THE LINE. Here in New York City we WILL follow the actual experts’ guidelines, and not politically motivated directives.” We applaud that statement.

However, your decision to immediately transfer the individuals out of these hotels does not follow experts’ guidelines and has profoundly negative short-term and long-term consequences. It is a clear signal to these vulnerable New Yorkers that their value as human beings and as members of our community means less than the misguided and intolerant opinions of those who object to seeing poor and homeless people of color in their neighborhoods. It disrupts the lives and impedes the stability of hundreds of New Yorkers who have been desperately trying to survive the pandemic and overcome homelessness. And it opens the floodgates for NIMBYist challenges to the siting of critical housing, shelters, and services for years to come.

Coalition for the Homeless shelter monitors and social workers have spoken with many residents of the Lucerne and other hotels in recent weeks, and the residents have expressed their gratitude at

being in facilities where they feel better protected from the coronavirus. However, they are also stung by the heated rhetoric and fear-mongering that they hear from some in the neighborhood. There is little question of how your capitulation to those voices will be understood by these individuals.

Moving the hotel residents from one facility to another will not result in the provision of any additional services, as the same nonprofit providers will move with them. The assertions of the West Side Community Organization and their legal counsel about the lack of services in the hotels were egregiously ill-informed. As you know, the hotels in which homeless individuals were placed do in fact offer an array of services from nonprofit shelter operators.

The hastily implemented transfer of the individuals from the hotels will have a destabilizing effect on hundreds of vulnerable New Yorkers. We have been informed that the men who reside at the Lucerne Hotel will be moved to the Harmonia Shelter on 31<sup>st</sup> Street, which is currently used as a shelter for adult families. The men who reside at the Lucerne have already been moved several times during the pandemic, and we are concerned that the stress of these repeated transfers will exacerbate their underlying health conditions and disrupt progress they were making toward achieving permanent housing and stability.

We also work regularly with residents of the Harmonia, many of whom have been placed there as a reasonable accommodation for a disability. We and our colleagues at other advocacy organizations are already receiving panicked phone calls from adult families who fear that they will be moved to another shelter that might not be able to provide the reasonable accommodations to which they are legally entitled. As an institutional plaintiff in the *Butler v. City of New York* settlement – which is designed to ensure that the right to shelter includes accessible accommodations for those with disabilities, consistent with Federal, State, and local laws – we are deeply concerned about the impact of these sudden transfers on homeless New Yorkers with disabilities, including both those moving into and out of the Harmonia.

At the same time, the women at the Long Island City Plaza will be moved to the Flatlands shelter in Brooklyn, which has long been operated as a shelter for families with children. This means that not only will the single adult women be moved from western Queens to southeastern Brooklyn – severing ties with their jobs, medical providers, and other services nearby their current shelter placement – but also that families with children will be uprooted from a familiar neighborhood to new shelters across the city in the days leading up to the start of the school year. The Coalition for the Homeless operates an afterschool program for kids in the Flatlands shelter and has witnessed the tremendous barriers that the families have already faced in trying to access remote learning. Now, rather than supporting these families as the school year resumes, the City is compounding their trauma and uncertainty by moving them to undisclosed locations throughout the city.

It should also be noted that many of the complaints of the West Side Community Organization are based on their discomfort at having to see people in their neighborhood who appear homeless and in need of services. However, these complaints incorrectly conflate shelter residents with people who are sleeping unsheltered on the streets. There has undoubtedly been an increase in the number and visibility of people sleeping rough on the streets, both as a result of the intertwined COVID-19 and economic crises and because the overnight shutdown of the subway system implemented in May has left unsheltered individuals fewer options of places to take refuge. The most effective way of

reducing the number of people sleeping on the streets is, in fact, to *increase* the use of hotels, as the congregate shelter system is viewed by many as an irrational choice of refuge during a pandemic. Your decision to move people out of the Lucerne and other hotels in the absence of any public health rationale may thus result in *more* people sleeping on the streets, not fewer.

A report released last month by the National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that 30 to 40 million Americans are at risk of eviction in the coming months because of the economic devastation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and a recent Columbia University study projects that homelessness could increase by as much as 40 to 45 percent nationally in the year ahead. It is of utmost importance that we pull together as a city to effectively address this oncoming crisis, which will require every community to do their part. However, the precedent you have set by allowing the West Side Community Organization and its counsel to determine where New Yorkers in need are placed during the worst public health crisis in more than a century serves as a debilitating and far-reaching setback in the effort to base such decisions on rationality, fairness, and compassion. The voices of NIMBYism and intolerance have certainly been emboldened, which will make it even more difficult to properly address the city's crisis of mass homelessness for years to come.

We again urge you to not bow to pressure from a vocal and poorly informed minority by returning homeless New Yorkers to congregate shelters before it is safe to do so, and we urge you to publicly renounce the pernicious NIMBY rhetoric that lessens our city. The stakes could not be higher for our most vulnerable neighbors, and for all New Yorkers. We must ensure that all remain safe for the duration of the public health crisis.

We are available to discuss these issues further with your office at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



David Giffen  
Executive Director