

Steven Banks
Commissioner

September 4, 2020

Joslyn Carter
DHS Administrator

Dear Borough President Brewer, Congress Member Nadler, Council Member Rosenthal, Assembly Member Rosenthal, Senator Jackson, Chair Diller, and Hon. Messinger,

33 Beaver Street
New York, NY 10004

Thank you for your recent correspondence to the Commissioner regarding the temporary emergency relocation housing for individuals experiencing homelessness. These relocations from congregate shelters to vacant hotels in neighborhoods across our City, including the Upper West Side, were a necessary measure to ensure the safety of our clients during the global pandemic that we are currently facing.

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This Administration has made concrete progress helping our neighbors in need get back on their feet, driving evictions down more than 40% through our first-in-the-nation right-to-counsel program, helping more than 145,000 New Yorkers remain in or move into housing through the programs we rebuilt from scratch, transforming a haphazard shelter system four decades in the making, and assisting thousands of unsheltered neighbors in their transition off the streets onto a pathway to permanency. We remain focused on taking that progress further in every way, even during these extraordinary times.

As you know, DHS developed a multi-pronged response for implementing City health guidance on isolation and mitigation to protect the health and safety of our City's most vulnerable residents during this crisis. The use of commercial hotel rooms has been and continues to be an essential part of these efforts, with thousands of commercial hotel units brought online on a temporary, emergency basis to stop the spread of the virus and help with maintaining appropriate social distancing for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. Through these strategies, we have proactively relocated New Yorkers who we serve from larger shelter locations with congregate settings across the city to commercial hotel units, where we can protect their health more effectively during this crisis. These temporary relocations provides the required social distancing for the relocated clients as well as for clients remaining in the targeted shelters from which clients have been moved.

The City of New York has a moral and legal obligation to provide shelter to New Yorkers experiencing homelessness regardless of background. This includes helping people rebuild their lives and grow through second chances as they get back on their feet. We don't discriminate based on people's previous experiences or backgrounds. Now more than ever, these services and supports, this empathy and humanity, are essential, across all communities, across the five boroughs – and our commitment to providing them to those in need is and remains unwavering.

DHS continues to maintain an open dialogue with the community to ensure concerns about these temporary relocations from our congregate shelters are addressed as they arise, as we all work together to adapt and implement unprecedented solutions to these unprecedented challenges for the city. As we have committed, we will continue to meet with you as well as other elected officials and stakeholders while these temporary sites operate during the continuing pandemic. Pending our next meeting, here are some brief responses to questions that you have raised:

Regarding Recreational Space & Programming: All of our facilities, including commercial hotels that are part of our congregate shelter de-density efforts, offer social services. On-site services include case management, permanency planning and housing placement assistance, referrals to medical and mental health services, independent living and life skills workshops, and residential services and support in finding and securing employment. Off-site service linkages continue to include primary healthcare, health/mental health services, substance use treatment, vocational training, employment placement, GED instruction, conflict mediation, and legal services.

Protecting the health and safety of our clients and staff is critical, particularly when considering indoors and outdoors space for recreational purposes. DHS will continue conversations with the owner of the Lucerne about the potential use of roof space for this purpose; however, the property owner does not currently have a Certificate of Occupancy for use of the roof, and it is therefore currently unsafe and unlawful for clients and staff to utilize the roof for activities. We continue to welcome suggestions from members of the community regarding other potential space that is available in the community that would allow for safe programming for our clients.

Regarding Security: DHS is committed to prioritizing the safety of clients, staff, and community members alike, and all facilities have onsite security 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And as we have publicly stated, Project Renewal and HELP staff are actively coordinating on community patrols between their locations. Being a good neighbor is essential to the work that we do. That's why every site also has a "good neighbor" policy to ensure that clients are aware of the standards we expect. Individuals who are not adhering to "good neighbor" standards are engaged by providers and could ultimately be transferred from these locations if it is determined that they would be better served at another facility. We welcome the opportunity to work with all of the elected officials to consider additional enhancements that can be made to further improve the safety and security of staff, clients and the community.

As we shared in a prior communication, the City of New York places all clients in appropriate locations in accordance with State Law. All verifiably homeless New Yorkers have a right to shelter regardless of background. This includes helping people rebuild their lives and grow through second chances as they get back on their feet. In addition to following State Law as relates to residency requirements, we have to follow the law on providing shelter to all who are experiencing homelessness, regardless of background, since New York is under court order to provide shelter to all those who need it – and it would therefore be unlawful to discriminate against individuals based on their backgrounds or prior experiences.

Regarding Unsheltered Outreach: Dedicated HOME-STAT outreach teams canvass the Upper West Side, including locations raised by elected officials, multiple times a day in order to work to ascertain unsheltered individuals' housing status and help those experiencing homelessness accept services and come indoors with persistence and compassion. Goddard-Riverside, as part of the Manhattan Outreach Consortium (MOC), conducts daily and nightly outreach to New Yorkers experiencing unsheltered homelessness on the Upper West Side and is in active coordination and communication with the social service providers at the commercial hotel locations in the area. We continually strengthen our person-to-person engagement to get know more unsheltered New Yorkers, understand their unique needs, and build the trust that will ultimately encourage them to accept services and come indoors, which can take hundreds of contacts and supportive conversations. Every engagement, and every conversation, represents progress in the right direction, and the more opportunities we have for engaging New Yorkers in need, the better. An individual who may not be ready to accept services today may be ready to make that transition tomorrow. Throughout the pandemic we have understood the need to increase the availability of low-threshold transitional housing resources to address street

homelessness and have brought on additional safe haven and stabilization bed capacity intended to serve these vulnerable New Yorkers. Through these efforts, under this Administration we've helped nearly 2,900 unsheltered New Yorkers off the streets and subways and into safe, stable housing where they have remained.

It is an undeniably challenging time for our City and for all New Yorkers, regardless of housing status, with the New York and national economies struggling severely and unemployment high across all groups of people, types of professions, and walks of life. **To that end, it is not accurate to attribute all challenges in our City to homelessness.** As we work together to adapt and implement unprecedented solutions to these unprecedented challenges, we're committed to adapting to a constantly evolving situation, and as members of the community, we intend to be good neighbors, engaging openly and making this the best and safest experience it can be for these individuals as they get back on their feet. We continue to encourage the community to call 311 if they see an individual in need of non-emergency assistance and/or to report a street condition like debris that can then be addressed by a City agency.

Regarding Community Input: Unlike a regular shelter siting where we have established procedures to provide at least 30 days prior notice before a shelter opens – and in fact do so – these and other temporary relocations from congregate shelters to protect public health by promoting social distancing have been implemented on an emergency basis as part of the City's effort to flatten the curve of the virus. We have met with the community on August 6th, August 19th, and August 24th to discuss these temporary relocation facilities and the ways in which we can most effectively work together to support New Yorkers experiencing homelessness as they get back on their feet in this crisis. Our next meeting is scheduled for September 4th.

Of course, at the point at which public health guidance determines that clients can be relocated back to our congregate shelters from the temporary emergency relocation sites, we will inform you and the community. We are continuing to work with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to determine when and how it will be safe to phase out the use of the temporary emergency relocation hotels and return to the congregate shelters.

Thank you for your deep concern for the health and safety of New Yorkers in need in these extraordinary circumstances. Of course, your staff can continue to contact myself or my staff directly about any concerns that may arise.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joslyn Carter". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joslyn Carter, LCSW
DHS Administrator