

NEWS

Residents Ask City for Help Addressing Quality of Life Issues After Hotel Shelters Pop Up in Sunset Park



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The Glo Hotel on 850 4th Avenue is one of several Sunset Park hotels being used as homeless shelters. (Image: Bklyner reader)

Sunset Park residents say a confluence of hotel shelters in the northern part of their neighborhood has led to public safety and quality-of-life concerns, and they're asking the city for help in addressing the issue.

At a meeting last week, members of Brooklyn Community Board 7 voted to send letters to the Department of Homeless Services, the NYPD's 72nd Precinct and Council Member Carlos Menchaca, among other public officials, asking them to organize a collaborative response to an increase in complaints from residents in a one-mile area that stretches from 20th to 40th Streets between 3rd and 5th Avenues.

There are at least seven hotel shelters in the area, the community board says, and since the coronavirus pandemic began last year, problems have

“Brooklyn Community District 7 has received an increase in complaints from residents about threatening behavior, petty theft, litter and drug paraphernalia, panhandling, public urination, public drinking, etc., and this behavior increased dramatically at the start of the pandemic, when several hotels in the area were repurposed as homeless shelters,” said Karen Rolnick, chair of the Board's newly-created Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness Issues, reading from the resolution.

The city has controversially made use of hotels as shelter spaces for years, but the practice exploded when the coronavirus pandemic began and forced the city to relocate residents out of crowded shelters to keep them safe and socially distanced. The city is now housing more than

12,000 residents in 120 hotels, 67 of which are housing those relocated from permanent shelters.

At earlier meetings of the committee, residents said that while they understood the need to provide housing for those without it, they also said the city and shelter operators were failing to properly communicate with local residents or doing what was necessary to ensure their safety.

“I don’t go to Third Avenue at night,” said Daniel Murphy, who lives near the Sleep Inn hotel shelter on 22nd Street and Third Avenue, at a committee meeting on February 23rd. “I’ve had people wanting to fight me on the street. Our neighbor was out with his two-year-old son and his dog, and the men were saying ‘I’m going to effing kill you and your dog.’ Another neighbor ran out and grabbed the kid. He goes into the shelter and says, ‘you need to help take care of us.’ There’s no response.”

While precinct-wide data shows most year-to-date crime numbers are down slightly from last year, 911 calls at many local hotel locations have jumped up, according to numbers provided by NYPD. In the first four months of 2021, the L hotel at 135 32nd Street was the requested location for 78 police, fire and EMS calls; last year, that number was just 10. At the Glo Hotel at 850 4th Avenue, the number of calls jumped from 44 to 108. At the Hotel BPM at 139 33rd Street, the call count went from 35 to 85.

Number of 911 Calls to Sunset Park Hotels

Hotel Name	Address	Calls 1/1/20-4/25/20	Calls 1/1/21-4/25/21	% Difference
Comfort Inn	353 38th Street	34	55	61.8%
Hotel BPM	139 33rd Street	35	85	142.9%
The L Hotel	135 32nd Street	10	78	680.0%
GLo Best Western	850 4th Avenue	21	50	138.1%
Howard Johnson	235 24th Street	54	26	-51.9%
Sleep Inn	134 22nd Street	44	108	145.5%
Comfort Inn Prospect Park	150 20th Street	13	16	23.1%

Source: NYPD

At the February committee meeting, officer Daniel Greene from the 72nd Precinct said “the homeless shelters have been the biggest topic over everything else,” but that he and his colleagues often avoided issuing summonses to shelter residents for low-level offenses, instead trying to calm them down or educate them on the ‘good neighbor’ policy enforced by many shelters.

“These are people in a homeless shelter, so I’m pretty sure they don’t have the means to answer a \$25 or \$50 summons,” Greene said.

Nevertheless, he said, just the Sleep Inn hotel on 22nd Street, had been the source of 39 emergency calls between January 25th and February 23rd.

While neighbors have since opened lines of communications with the operator of that shelter, the African-American Planning Commission, leading to some issues being addressed (including transferring the resident who threatened neighbors), board members say similar issues exist throughout the district and require a holistic response.

They want DHS to work with service providers to arrange a coordinated security detail throughout the neighborhood, organize monthly meetings to discuss neighbors' concerns, provide on-site mental health services to shelter residents, and be more transparent with information ranging from complaint statistics to site capacity information. They also want the police to issue summons for violations of the law, requiring community service in lieu of fines if an individual is unable to pay.

“My board welcomes people from all over the world,” Jeremy Laufer, the Board’s district manager, told Bklyner. “The community would like to welcome these folks too, as our neighbors. But the city has not done a good job communicating, and it makes people suspicious. And the community resources have not been put in place.”

At another Committee meeting on April 6th, DHS staffer Yuri Sanchez that the local police precinct had reached out to her with concerns about “crime and disorder” in the area, and said she had asked the precinct to provide specific statistics to her.

Nevertheless, when asked for comment, an agency spokesperson asked Bklyner if the board had provided data that showed shelter residents were responsible for problems in the area, and expressed concern that attributing quality-of-life challenges to shelter residents “otherizes and stigmatizes” them.

The spokesperson, Neha Sharma, said the agency could not respond to the Community Board’s resolution until it had received and reviewed the proposed letters. But in a general statement about the use of hotel

shelters during the pandemic, Sharma said that “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.”

“As we have said throughout the pandemic, the temporary use of emergency relocation hotels was always intended to be temporary and not intended to be used in this way on an ongoing basis,” Sharma said. “As our City continues to recover, we are watching our health indicators closely and working with the City’s Health Department to determine when and how clients can be safely relocated back to shelters from the temporary emergency hotel relocation sites, and we’ll inform communities when our City is ready to take that next step.”

De Blasio has not yet laid out a timeline for the transition back to traditional shelters.

Menchaca’s office did not respond to a request for comment, and board members said he has not participated in committee meetings. When, back in 2018, news suddenly emerged that the Brooklyn Way hotel on Fourth Avenue between 25th and 26th streets would be used as a shelter, Menchaca said that “Establishing shelters in the dark of night breaks any possibility of trust between neighborhoods and an administration.”

But some constituents have accused him of ignoring or sidestepping the issue of hotel shelters, which has been a longstanding concern for the neighborhood. In 2017, outgoing CB7 chair Daniel Murphy complained that Mayor Bill de Blasio’s administration was unfairly oversaturating the

neighborhood with shelters and using the neighborhood as a “dumping ground for the city’s problems.”

Pre-pandemic data from July 2019 shows that the neighborhood hosted 1.4% of the citywide shelter population, though only .6% of shelter residents come from the district.

Longer term, the de Blasio administration has looked to phase out the use of hotels as shelters entirely by 2023, as part of its Turning the Tide plan to address homelessness. In their place, the administration has worked to open up to 90 community-based shelters, a process that has also drawn strong reactions from some local leaders.

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