September 25, 2020

Steven Banks
Commissioner
Department of Social Services
150 Greenwich St, 40th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Use of Commercial Hotels as Temporary Shelters in Manhattan Community District 4

Dear Commissioner Banks:

We write regarding the overuse of commercial hotels as shelters for those experiencing homelessness in Community District 4 (MCD4), and the deleterious effect that inadequate planning in procuring these hotel shelters has had in the district. Residents of MCD4 (and the elected officials who represent them) seek the following: restoration of quality of life, better coordination with DHS for the operation and location of hotel shelters; and most importantly, a commitment to work effectively and empathetically to address the realities of homelessness within the district.

In addressing these issues, we request the following from DHS:

1. **Targeted reduction in hotel shelter density on West 36th St**: DHS concentrated large numbers of their clients within MCD4's boundaries in a very short time frame. As we understand it, at least 2,100 DHS clients have been relocated to at least seven sites in the district. The density of the transfer has strained the ability of the community to absorb it. Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) and other local stakeholders have identified the 300 block of West 36 Street as especially concerning. Two hotel shelters, the Springhill Inn Suites at 338 West 36 Street and the Double Tree at 341 West 36 Street, are housing 518 clients who were relocated to this single block. This created a density of hotel shelter residents that surpassed any other block in the borough. MCB4 and our offices are willing to work with DHS to shift one or both hotel shelters to other, more appropriate hotels within MCD4. Such a move must ensure that shelter tenants are not moved far afield of their current location, must be moved to a location with sufficient recreation and programming spaces, and must be provided with sufficient social services. Shelter tenants must be provided adequate notice of a pending move in order to prepare, must be provided with assistance and support in the move, and DHS must ensure that any alternate location will not result in further displacement.

2. **Community Input:** We are pleased to hear that DHS has committed to leading a regular meeting between MCB4, NYPD and other relevant city and non-profit agencies, and MCD4 hotel shelter providers. We request that details be provided forthwith and that these meetings begin as soon as possible and include the undersigned local elected officials. This will give providers the opportunity to hear and address concerns, enable neighbors to alert the providers and NYPD to ongoing issues, and better connect each shelter with the community and local resources.

In addition, DHS must provide an updated master spreadsheet of hotel shelters currently operating in Manhattan to elected officials and Community Boards, including the providers for each hotel and contact information for both the on-site directors and the overall provider supervisor. This will help with planning and partnering with DHS on hotel shelter operations.

It must be noted that DHS failed to involve neighborhood block associations, BIDs, MCB4, or local elected officials in the siting and selection of these hotel shelters. In many cases, all of the above stakeholders were only informed of a site selection after the fact. We understand that legal notification requirements may not apply to these shelters given their temporary status; however that requirement does not preclude notification which would have provided the opportunity to coordinate with DHS to better ensure successful placements of these facilities.

3. **Security:** All temporary hotel shelters must have 24-hour experienced security staff assigned to the area around each site. All non-profit providers should also work with street homeless individuals around their sites and contact organizations like Bowery Resident Committee (BRC)'s Homeless Outreach Team to assist them. However, as you will see in the next bullet, we are requesting a more centralized approach that includes the providers and BRC's Outreach Team.

   NYPD or DHS Peace Officers need to frequently patrol the area outside the hotel security's patrol perimeter to control criminal activity taking place around the temporary shelters. The 10th Precinct has instituted "8 for 8." Eight officers are assigned for eight weeks to patrol the area where there is a concentration of hotels. The program worked well, even before the clients of BRC were moved out of the Cachet Hotel due to evidence of Legionnaire's disease. This precinct and the community are also working with the Center for Court Innovation's Midtown Community Court to address quality of life issues. We need to do the same in the 13th, Midtown North, and Midtown South precincts, and we urge DHS to coordinate with NYPD to institute these patrols.

4. **Outreach workers:** In addition to security, DHS must immediately fund outreach workers who are coordinated centrally and able to respond to individuals in the street. This will enable staff to utilize established relationships they have with shelter clients. The various providers active in the community cannot create such a staff as they only work with their own clients. They at times overlap or are not in the right place at the right time. Central coordination and outreach workers would make a real difference both in the perception of responsiveness to homeless individuals on the street (regardless of whether they are housed), and in the care of those people who need help. People who appear to be homeless could be a client of one of the providers in the hotels. They might also be experiencing homelessness and have problems that are being addressed by the Outreach program at BRC (which might be working to get the person into a Safe Haven program). Central coordination would enable contact and management of efforts between all parties.

   It is unclear to what degree DHS is coordinating with non-profit providers and setting guidelines for social service providers at these hotel shelters. MCB4 and local elected officials have in many cases needed to engage with providers directly to request that certain measures be put in place to ensure safety, health, and quality of life in the vicinity. The rapid transfer of such a great number of clients has overwhelmed the ability of providers to properly manage the situation, exacerbated by the lack of clear guidelines from DHS. The shelter clients need social service support.

5. **Recreational & Programming Space:** Each hotel must have designated recreation space for its clients. If there is no space available on the property, each provider should find a site within

walking distance of the shelter. These recreational spaces must be sufficiently large to allow for a significant portion of hotel shelter residents to safely social distance while engaging in recreation. Regardless of the Mayor's stated intention to move clients out of these shelters "immediately," no such plan appears to be forthcoming.

Many clients now in MCD4 came from other neighborhoods or outside of the borough, meaning they have been separated from their communities and, in many cases, their social service providers. Additionally, many of the hotels chosen in MCD4 have few amenities beneficial to public and mental health, such as outdoor spaces or large conference rooms. As a result, clients seek recreation in the streets.

6. **Contract:** Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer requested and received a copy of the 170-page contract made between the Hotel Association of New York and the City of New York and is currently reviewing it. We understand that there are revisions to reflect the hotels that have been added since this document is dated April 2020. Please update us on how this contract has been amended, expanded, or extended since April 2020.

We understand that the current pandemic has rendered the congregate shelter system inimical to public health and safety. DHS has felt compelled to quickly relocate its clients in congregate settings to individual hotel rooms. We further understand that DHS considers this a temporary solution for the duration of the crisis. We are committed to assisting DHS in developing a long-term solution that does not require significant use of commercial spaces as shelters.

However, it has become clear that the rush to move clients out of congregate settings has resulted in a difficult situation in parts of MCD4. The above issues have resulted in difficult conditions for clients sheltering in hotels in MCD4, for their social service providers, and for community members. There have been numerous reports of physical and verbal assaults, open drug use, public defecation and urination, and a general precipitous decline in quality of life. These conditions have engendered an atmosphere of resistance and hostility to shelter residents and their providers, including the dissemination of false but disturbing rumors about the shelters and their residents. This is a troubling development as residents of MCD4 have historically welcomed properly sited, managed, and sized shelters into their neighborhoods. By taking our recommended actions, DHS can begin to rebuild the trust that has been broken and improve the quality of life for local residents and for those experiencing homelessness who currently live in the district. Absent these measures, DHS will have made it more difficult to secure neighborhood support for future shelters or supportive housing.

We look forward to your response. Please contact Brian Lewis at the Office of the Manhattan Borough President at 212-669-8774 or blewis@manhattanbp.nyc.gov with any questions.

Sincerely,

Gale A. Brewer
Manhattan Borough President

Richard Gottfried
NYS Assemblymember, 75th District

Robert Jackson
NYS Senator, 31st District

Lowell D. Kern
Chair, Manhattan Community Board 4