



October 8, 2020

Dear Westside Community Organization,

We write today to invite you to join our work to create a strong, safe, and collaborative community alongside shelter residents temporarily housed on the Upper West Side. We believe that your resources and advocacy could have a powerful impact by working *with* shelter residents to hold DHS and service providers accountable for meeting the needs of the entire community without pursuing the displacement of individuals temporarily housed here for COVID safety.

### **Background**

We extend this invitation based on your public and private statements expressing equal concern for the well-being of both temporary shelter residents and the long-term community. As such, we hope you will be receptive to the firsthand knowledge of shelter residents as to what serves their interests, represented here by Lucerne resident and advocate Shams DaBaron.

We are all parents, and we want everyone to feel safe in our temporarily shared community. When we talk about safety, it is essential to foreground the safety of Black and brown persons who live in, work in, or visit the UWS. As this summer's renewed media attention to police violence has shown us, the very increase in policing that makes white and affluent persons feel safe may endanger Black and brown persons. And as the sickening death of Daniel Prude in Rochester has confirmed, those struggling with mental health issues are at even greater risk of being harmed by police untrained to handle their needs.

It is equally crucial to understand mental health and substance use issues in the socio-economic contexts that shape treatment and outcomes. While the men housed at the Lucerne suffer many of the same heartaches and struggles as those in the middle and upper class (depression, alcohol and substance use disorders, painful family relationships, trauma from abuse, etc.), they do not have the same access to or range of therapeutic treatment options, nor do they possess comparable cushions of financial stability and personal and professional support networks. Their temporary circumstance of being our neighbors provides a transformational opportunity to close this gap through [radical empathy](#).

### **The Radisson transfer is not a “win-win” solution**

We have understood from correspondence with you that when you initially convened this organization, you hoped there might be a “win-win” solution: reduce the UWS shelter population, and provide more or better services for those in need somewhere else.

Unfortunately, the proposed new location for the Lucerne men, the Financial District Radisson, does not meet these stated objectives. The Radisson is a commercial hotel where, in the best case, residents would receive identical services to those they receive at the Lucerne. In reality, these services will be interrupted by the move and reduced by the loss of the privately-funded Goddard Riverside recreational program. There is no better site available: congregate shelters are not COVID safe and all socially distanced potential sites are already occupied, as evidenced by the now-abandoned efforts to displace the disabled adults at the Harmonia shelter.

Relocation is therefore not a win-win, but a win-lose. Aside from the fact that the actual services will not improve, the residents of the Lucerne do not *want* to be moved, as Mr. DaBaron can attest. Many have shared that the news of the displacement has generated extreme trauma and renewed mental health challenges, with many even feeling as though life was not worth living. Some Lucerne residents have said they would rather return to the streets than be placed in a new neighborhood where they might feel hated and vilified yet again. [Repeated, coerced displacement](#) of Black and brown individuals (who make up 90% of shelter residents) is part of this country's shameful legacy of systemic racism. We know that victimizing these individuals is not your goal, and yet it is an inevitable outcome of your current approach.

## **A transformative alternative**

There is another path. You are absolutely right that there are systemic issues in the approach of DHS and the city to homelessness. These issues require a bold vision and increased funding. Westside Community Organization could partner with Open Hearts in creating a brand new model for shelter and community engagement while holding DHS and service providers accountable.

It is possible to meet our shared objective of community safety while directly improving the lives of shelter residents for as long as they remain our neighbors. Mr. DaBaron's efforts to bring additional Recovery Center programs on-site to the Lucerne location have already done just that, as have Open Hearts' efforts in creating community engagement activities such as spiritual walk-and-talks and AA meetings led by volunteer Licensed Social Workers. Moreover, the six-day-a-week Goddard program, which provides meals, jobs, and recreation, would drastically decrease neighborhood congestion at no cost to the city. Unfortunately, the uncertainty about the Lucerne's future has prevented the implementation of this program that directly addresses both permanent and shelter residents' needs.

Project Renewal stands ready to address community concerns, and our shared advocacy could ensure follow-through. For example, they have committed to freezing enrollments at the Lucerne site, and they have reduced the headcount through transfers based on policy infractions. Accelerating the pace of permanent housing placements could further reduce the number of residents and allow better support for those that remain. We can jointly request that Project Renewal further increase supportive staffing not only within the building but also outside of it, where they can additionally conduct outreach to individuals experiencing street homelessness.

Together, we can create deep, transformational community-shelter engagement. When shelter residents feel respected and accepted by their community, they respond in kind. The relations that many Project Renewal residents have forged with Open Hearts has made them want to become allies in creating a safer, friendlier Upper West Side. Envision a world where permanent UWS residents can volunteer with their children to help our temporary neighbors get back on their feet while we all care for the community together. This would represent the true win-win you are seeking.

## **What's next?**

To begin building this better alternative requires one thing: for WestCo to communicate to the city that the Radisson transfer is not the solution it seeks. If you are open to considering solutions that do not involve displacement, we invite you to have a good faith conversation together with shelter residents on how we can all pursue a shared goal of community safety and wellbeing in collaboration with our temporarily housed neighbors.

Saturday October 10 is World Homeless Day. Imagine the power of uniting to declare that the Upper West Side is strong, welcoming, and inclusive, and ready to be part of a revolutionary new approach for caring for unhoused individuals in New York City and beyond.

Sincerely,



Corinne Low  
On behalf of The Upper West Side Open Hearts Initiative



Heather Gunn-Rivera



Amanda Fialk



Melissa E. Sanchez



Shams DaBaron  
On behalf of Lucerne shelter residents