



EMBARGOED UNTIL: 5AM, AUGUST 28

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UWS Open Hearts Initiative Delivers Open Letter to Mayor Bill de Blasio: Group Demands Homeless Residents Remain in Temporary Hotel Shelters Until Safe to Move Elsewhere

New York, NY, August 28, 2020: Members of the UWS Open Hearts Coalition delivered an open letter, signed by more than 700 New Yorkers, including 476 UWS residents, teachers, and business owners, to Mayor Bill de Blasio this morning. The letter demanded that the non-profit shelters run by Project Renewal, Help USA, and the Center for Urban Community Services remain in local hotels until it is safe to move the populations back to their original locations. Co-signed by the Coalition for the Homeless, Homelessness Services United, and many other homelessness advocacy organizations, the letter demands that the city's decisions about shelter location are made in response to evidence-based public health guidelines, not political pressure or private interests.

"We urge the de Blasio administration to stay resolved in its attempt to protect all New Yorkers from the spread of COVID-19, as well as to ensure the rights of all residents of our community to live free of harassment and dehumanization," says the letter. "We call on the Department of Homeless Services to allow shelter operations to remain in hotels throughout the city—including our neighborhood—until public health experts determine that their use is no longer needed."

The UWS Open Hearts Coalition delivered the letter after a lawyer for a group opposing the shelters threatened to sue the city if the residents weren't removed from the hotels immediately. The letter also disproves false assertions made by that group's attorney, Randy Mastro, on NY1 on Thursday, August 27th, that the hotels were being used as "SROs" and that residents were not getting the services they needed.

"We are in the middle of a pandemic and we all need to do our part," said Corinne Low of the UWS Open Hearts Initiative, a coalition of UWS neighbors that was launched to support the homeless residents of the shelters. "I'm shocked by the recklessness and cruelty of requesting the city move these shelters to satisfy a few loud voices, when the reality is that crime statistics show that crime is down 10% in our area."

"Mr. Mastro's mischaracterizations of the shelters reeks of Giuliani-era tactics of spreading fear instead of facts. These shelters are not 'SROs'—they are providing the complete set of services



that homeless shelters provide, including mental health and addiction services. When the shelters moved to our neighborhood, all the staff and services supporting the residents came with them,” added Low.

The controversy began back in July 2020, when New York City’s Department of Homeless Services (DHS) implemented an emergency relocation effort to help protect shelter residents and the city from a potential Covid-19 outbreak. As part of this plan, 139 of the city’s hotels, which had been shuttered since the start of the pandemic, including three on the UWS, agreed to take in shelter organizations and residents to prevent the virus from spreading in crowded, congregate shelters.

Prior to the pandemic, these shelter residents had been living in dorm-style accommodations across the city, with multiple, sometimes dozens of people in one room, unable to follow the recommended social distancing guidelines.

Along with its more than 700 individual signatories, today’s letter is endorsed by Open New York, Coalition for the Homeless, the Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center, helpNYC, Neighbors Together, Human.NYC, Homelessness Services United, the Mutual Aid NYC Housing Team, the Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center, the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, Vocal-NY and the Columbia Human Rights Law Review.

Visit uwsstrong.org to see the full list of signatories and for more information.

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