

69th regiment armory

Gramercy Park community defeats Armory men's shelter plan



Lexington Avenue Armory: Its latest controversy

NYS Division of Military and Naval Affairs

By Peter Simunovich

Arlene Harrison, a teacher of special education for more than 30 years and a volunteer at a homeless shelter and soup kitchen, has lived on East 20th Street for three decades and is actively involved in Gramercy Park community affairs. A lifetime trustee of Gramercy Park and president of the Gramercy Park Block Association, it is her little slice of Manhattan.

About a month ago, Harrison learned that the Department of Homeless Services had proposed to replace homeless women at the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, between 25th and 26th streets, with homeless men from Bellevue Hospital. She quickly saw red lights flashing. Nobody in the area knew that the DHS planned to convert the shelter from women to men.

"[The DHS] really did not give us any warning," says Mona Beltran, 20, who plans to study finance at Baruch College. "We got it from the 23rd Street Association."

There had been no problem with the women at the Armory shelter in the past, Beltran says, but she became worried because among the male homeless at the hospital were sex offenders, former felons and others with drug and alcohol issues. As of Oct. 1, according to the New

York State Sex Offenders Registry Web site, 28 male sex offenders had listed their residence as Bellevue Hospital, she says. The DHS says there were three, but Harrison says police had told her the number was fluid and could change daily. There are 12 schools within six blocks of the Armory, as well as Madison Square Park and several small parks in the area, where children play.

Beltran and others from the community began an intense campaign, posting 22,000 flyers and sending hundreds of e-mails and letters to stop the change. And they were successful.

"We put everything aside for this," says Tim Cohen, program director of the 23rd Street Association and Harrison's son. "Our day revolves about building a stronger and safer community. We were concerned for people and students in the neighborhood. The students were fearful for their safety and well-being, and parents also feared for their children."

Bernard Banks, 19, a business-communications and marketing student and a representative of the student government at Baruch College, helped start an awareness campaign. "We were concerned with the safety of the schools. At Baruch College, male and female students leave late at night," he says. "The main issues were the sex

offenders, former convicts and the lack of tracking sex offenders. We felt this was highly inappropriate."

Beltran says that the students did not know if there would be any increase in security off campus if the shelter proposal went ahead. "Sometimes I leave the campus at 11 p.m.," she says.

A DHS spokesperson says the State Division of Military Affairs rejected the changes because of "the modifications that the proposal articulated," among other things.

"The students are all joyous about the decision, and parents are calling to thank us," Harrison says. "This is a great relief. We stepped up to the plate, and I believe the overwhelming response of decent citizens coming together and supporting each other helped us. We have galvanized people, and it made me realize I'm on a mission to bring attention to the public about the broken system that doesn't track the sex offenders in New York City." ■

Peter Simunovich is a contributing writer to New York Resident. Please send responses to news editor Michael Y. Park at michaelp@resident.com.

Letters to the Editor

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When East Siders stick together, we win

All of us in the Gramercy Park, Madison Square and Rose Hill neighborhoods want to thank you for your coverage of our recent successful effort to stop the conversion of the Lexington Avenue Armory into a men's shelter with a population that could well have included Level 3 sex offenders, ex-convicts, and drug and alcohol abusers. It was to be open 24 hours a day and was to be an assessment center providing beds for up to 120 men each night.

This was never about the homeless; it was always a public safety issue. The Department of Homeless Services' secu-

rity plan for inside the facility called for private security officers who would carry firearms, and peace officers who would carry batons and would have search and arrest powers.

We felt that if this population was going to be such a threat inside the facility, it should not be located in a residential neighborhood in the immediate vicinity of elementary schools, colleges, student dormitories, residential buildings and a large city park two blocks away.

Our community has more than its fair share of social service facilities, many of which we have

actively supported, which were planned with the direct input of the community.

In this case, however, we were faced with an arrogant city agency which thought it could railroad an inappropriate, ill-conceived plan into the heart of this residential community, without any notice to the community leaders, police, community boards, elected officials and the residents it would affect.

Arlene S. Harrison
President

**Gramercy Park
Block Association**

Timothy S. Cohen
Program Director
23rd Street Association

Men's homeless shelter plan rejected for armory

By JUSTIN ROCKET SILVERMAN
anNewYork Staff Writer

Residents in the Gramercy Park neighborhood yesterday were elated after a city plan to replace a women's homeless shelter in the local armory with a men's shelter that would have housed recently released convicts was rejected.

"This is not a NIMBY thing, this is public safety issue," said Arlene Harrison, president of the Gramercy Park Block Association. "The armory is right across the street from Baruch College, and near a number of dorms and elementary schools."

The city's Department of Homeless Services was hoping to close the men's shelter currently operating at Bellevue Hospital, a mile northeast of Gramercy Park. The shelter is a temporary assessment center, which has a constant influx of new residents. "Regrettably, as a result of the state's decision,



The roof of the Lexington Avenue armory. (Justin Rocket Silverman)

DHS will be unable to proceed with plans to create a model prevention and assessment center at the armory," said James Anderson, DHS spokesman.

It was the state Division of Military and Navy Affairs, which administers the armory, and not the community objections that decided against the new men's shelter, said Anderson.

"We're extremely pleased that we stopped this, we don't much care what the of-

ficial reason is," said neighborhood activist Daniel Berger. "The people who would have been in this shelter are very dangerous people."

Councilwoman Margarita Lopez (D-Manhattan) said residents were worried that the homeless men would be loiter in the street and gather in nearby Madison Square Park.

Gramercy residents defeat men's shelter at armory

BY ALBERT AMATEAU

The city's plan to use the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue as a 24-hour, seven-day men's homelessness-prevention and assessment center fell apart last week after a month-long opposition campaign by the 23rd Street Association and the Gramercy Block Association.

The armory occupies the block on the east side of Lexington Avenue between 25th and 26th Streets across from Baruch College and had been used as a shelter for homeless women.

James Anderson, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeless Services, said on Mon. Oct. 24, that the department intended to return homeless women, who had been relocated four months ago, to the 69th Regiment Armory.

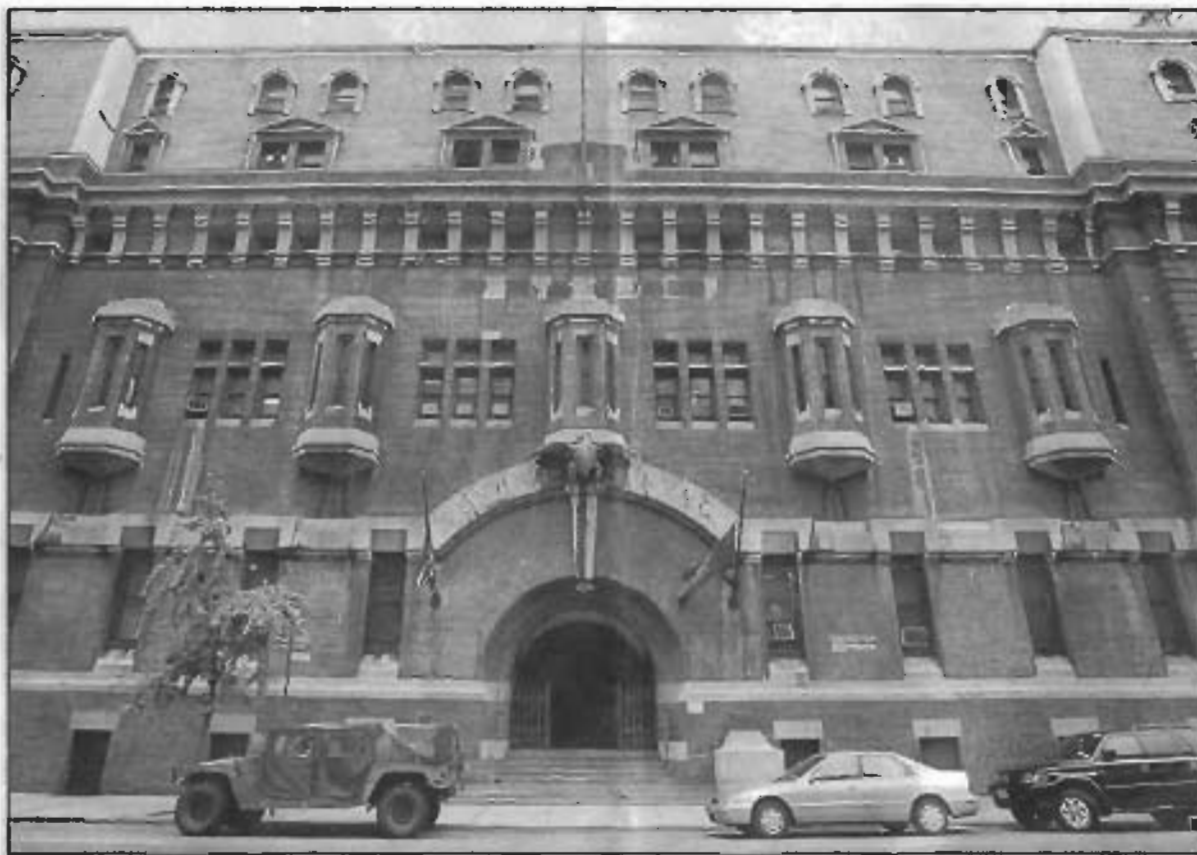
On Mon. Oct. 17, the day before Community Boards 5 had scheduled a public hearing about the proposal for a men's center with 120 beds, Community Board 5 received a letter from D.H.S. saying the plan had been dropped because the state agency that runs the armory denied permission to modify the building for its new use.

Nevertheless, more than 400 Gramercy area residents turned up at the Epiphany Church on Second Avenue at 22nd Street on Oct. 18 for what turned out to be a celebration of community clout in stopping a project they feared would endanger the neighborhood.

"There was a lot of relief at the meeting," said Timothy Cohen, program director of the 23rd Street Association. "Over the previous three weeks, we distributed more than 22,000 fliers to people on the 23rd Street Association and the Gramercy Block Association mailing lists," Cohen said.

Despite an Oct. 12 letter from D.H.S. stating that the department had notified elected officials and community boards last May of its new armory plan, elected officials including Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, Councilmember Eva Moskowitz, Assemblymembers Richard Gottfried and Steve Sanders and State Senators Liz Krueger and Tom Duane, said in an Oct. 14 statement they never received any notice.

"We heard about it around Sept. 28 from neighborhood doormen who were friendly with armory building staff," said Arlene Harrison, president of the Gramercy Block Association. "They said the women had been moved out in June and that D.H.S. was going to move the men's assessment shelter from Bellevue to here," she said.



Villager photo by Gary De

The 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, home of the famous Fighting 69th National Guard unit, as well as a homeless women's shelter.

In addition to the 120 beds for men who stay from three to 21 days during assessment, the armory was to have provided prevention services, including referring walk-in clients to drug counseling. Harrison said that based on the average annual intake of 11,755 men at Bellevue's 400 East 50th Street shelter, there could be more than 20,000 visits per year at the armory.

Harrison also said that homeless ex-offenders, including level-3 sex offenders whose addresses must be listed, are among the Bellevue shelter residents. According to the state registry, 28 level-3 sex offenders were listed at the Bellevue shelter, but D.H.S. said that only three actually lived there, Harrison said.

"For us [defeating the proposal] was a public safety issue," said Harrison. "This is a residential neighborhood, with Baruch College across the street, the School of Visual Arts nearby on 23rd Street and Madison Square Park,

where mothers take their children, two blocks away."

Sharon Ullman, president of the 23rd Street Association, said that opponents had invited D.H.S. personnel on Oct. 14 to attend the Community Board 5 Oct. 18 meeting at Epiphany Church. The department refused at first to send anyone to the meeting and then accepted it they could first meet with a select group of opponents the day before.

"We wrote back and said it wasn't appropriate for a select group to have a private meeting the day before a community board public hearing and that whatever they could tell us on Monday ought to be disclosed to everyone on Tuesday," Ullman said.

The proposal for a men's homeless-assessment and prevention center was part of a plan to downsize the Bellevue shelter. Anderson, the D.H.S. spokesperson, was unable to say how the armory situation would affect the plan.

Gramercy Pk. shelter nixed

Residents of Gramercy Park rejoiced yesterday as the city announced that plans to replace a homeless shelter for women with one for men had been scrapped.

"It was an ill-conceived plan," said community leader Arlene Harrison.

The plan would have placed a men's shelter in the armory at Lexington Avenue between 25th and 26th Street.

The facility already hosts a 164-bed women's shelter, which will remain.

Todd Venezia

THE NEW YORK SUN

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Plan To Move Homeless Shelter Stymied

By **LAUREN ELKIES**
Staff Reporter of the Sun

Several community groups are rejoicing that plans to move a group of homeless men into their neighborhood have been thwarted.

The city's Department of Homeless Services announced Monday that the State Division of Military and Naval Affairs rejected its plan to convert the Lexington Avenue Armory into an "assessment and prevention shelter for men."

The military and naval agency, which oversees the armory, did not return repeated calls for comment.

"The community really prevailed," the president of the Gramercy Park Block Association, Arlene Harrison, said.

Area residents were successful in making the "ill-conceived plan stop," she said.

The homeless services agency proposed to move 120 beds into the Lexington Avenue Armory between 25th and 26th streets from the 30th Street Men's

Shelter on First Avenue. The tentative plan was to close the men's shelter by the end of 2006.

The agency now expects to reopen the women's facility, but the overall plan and the time frames have to be revisited, a department spokesman, James Anderson, said.

The original proposal raised fears that homeless men convicted of sexual offenses would be roaming the neighborhood around the armory. Last month, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services' Sex Offender Registry listed 35 Level III sexual offenders — the level considered the most likely to recidivate — as residents of the men's shelter. In reality, Mr. Anderson said, there were only three.

Ms. Harrison said the opposition was not to the homeless. "It was always a public safety issue," she said.

Her association and others now plan to galvanize around the "broken" system of tracking sexual offenders, Ms. Harrison said.

Men's shelter will not move to 25th

Residents concerned over sex offenders

By Maciej Wroblewski

The New York City Department of Homeless Services on Monday withdrew its plan to open a shelter for adult men at the Lexington Armory, bringing an end to weeks of intense protests by the local community but not to concerns over city's lax attitude toward the tracking of dangerous Level 3 sex offenders.

In a letter that was faxed to Community Board 5 District Manager Gary Parker on Monday, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) said it was informed that the State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, which owns the Lexington Avenue armory between 25th and 26th Streets, has rejected DHS's proposal to convert the existing armory's shelter for homeless women into an assessment and prevention shelter for men.

Under the plan, the armory would have provided sleeping quarters for 120 adult men, including Level 3 sex offenders, ex-convicts, the mentally

ill and substance abusers, who would be relocated from the Bellevue shelter for men at 400-430 East 30th Street, which is set to close.

"We're extremely pleased about the outcome of this 24 hour, 7 days a week effort by thousands of people who came together to stop this ill-conceived plan," said Arlene Harrison, President of the Gramercy Park Block Association (GPBA), who together with attorney Dan Berger and Tim Cohen of the 23rd Street Association, was part of a strategy team responsible for distributing over 22,000 flyers and mobilizing thousands of local residents, students, businesses, organizations and schools to speak out against the worrying plan.

The group even asked Mayor Bloomberg to intervene, informing him that while the Bellevue shelter is located directly across the street from the city morgue, half a block away from the FDR Drive, and within a several square block complex of medical buildings, the armory is in a highly residential neighborhood

with elementary schools, playgrounds, colleges, student dormitories and a large park two blocks away frequented by hundreds of area children. Citing Council Member Margarita Lopez, whose district includes the armory was the first elected official to speak out against DHS's proposal.

Harrison reiterated that the community is not against the homeless but that the armory is not an appropriate place for such a facility.

To add insult to injury, she said, the DHS never reached out to neighborhood organizations about the plan and they only learned about it from a superintendent of a building on Lexington Avenue who was friends with security guards at the armory. "No facility should ever be planned, changed significantly, sited developed without direct input from the community it would affect," argued Harrison.

Although the DHS has claimed that elected officials and community members were notified of shelter plans in May of 2005, community leaders

point out that Congress Member Carolyn Maloney, State Senators Liz Krueger and Thomas K. Duane, Assembly Members Richard N. Gottfried and Steve Sanders and Council Member Eva Moskowitz, refuted that claim in a joint letter dated Oct. 14.

"We are outraged that no notification of this proposal had been received by local elected officials, the community boards, or other neighborhood groups and that the city had never talked with or listened to the community," elected officials said in the letter.

"Going forward it is our mission to see what we can do to improve the list of Level 3 sex offenders," said Tim Cohen, who said that while the community is happy the shelter plan was scrapped, it is still concerned that dozens of dangerous Level 3 sex offenders who list the Bellevue shelter as their home are nowhere to be found.

When Cohen checked the New York State Sex Offender Registry on October 1, he learned there were 28 Level 3 sex offenders, who are said to have a "high risk of repeat offense" and may

pose a "threat to public safety," who reported their address as the Bellevue shelter. Seventeen of these were convicted of crimes against minors.

Cohen said he was shocked by what he learned because just a few days earlier, in a September 28 interview, DHS Commissioner Linda Gibbs stated that the state "registry is not accurate" and that there are currently "just three" Level 3 sex offenders at the Bellevue shelter.

Although the DHS has no official obligation under the Sex Offender Registration Act to notify the authorities and the public about Level 3 sex offenders missing from their shelters, Cohen argued that as a city agency, it has a responsibility to report missing sexual predators to the public, especially schools and child care facilities.

"We are deeply concerned the DHS appears to take such a lax attitude toward these convicted Level 3 sex offenders in a time when states, cities and government agencies across the country are enacting stricter measures to protect the public from sex offenders," he said.