



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Tony Avella

## City Fails the Homeless ~ Senator Avella, Advocacy Group & Community Members Shed Light on Horrendous Conditions of Pan AM Homeless Shelter

TONY AVELLA December 11, 2014



(ELMHURST, NY) As Chair of the Social Services Committee, State Senator Tony Avella, joined Elmhurst United and area residents to shed light on the horrendous conditions of the Pan Am emergency homeless shelter, which is currently under review to be converted to a permanent shelter under a proposed \$42 million contract with the City.

The Pan Am Hotel emergency homeless shelter, located in Elmhurst, Queens, was converted in July to a homeless shelter, under a six month emergency contract set to expire on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014. However, an

application submitted in November would convert the Pan Am Hotel from an emergency to permanent shelter, a practice that has become commonplace among City shelters. The conversion application has now raised serious questions about the City's desperate need for housing, quality of life issues, and a host of other problems.

“It is an outrage to take an abandoned hotel, warehouse homeless families inside it, ignore shocking City Code and HPD violations, waste an exorbitant amount of taxpayer dollars in the process, and then award a \$42 million contract to a questionable-at-best organization, making the entire situation permanent,” **declared Senator Avella.** “As Chair of the State Senate’s Social Services Committee, I understand the vital importance of addressing our growing homeless population and I am committed to working to resolve these issues. However, this cannot be at the expense of homeless families and children or the community as a whole. We must look to fix this broken system, not warehouse those people that need our help most.”

### **New York City’s Desperate Need for Housing**

Over 59,000 people spend each night in a homeless shelter in New York City. The City is desperate to find housing to address this growing problem. In trying to meet this need, emergency facilities have been opened throughout the boroughs. Queens alone has two recently opened emergency facilities in Elmhurst and in Glendale.

Senator Avella concluded that this pressure has led to facilities that were intended to meet emergency needs being converted into permanent shelters – presenting questions about the appropriateness of these shelters for long-term housing, as well as the process by which the City has awarded contracts for these shelters.

Senator Avella and community residents explained that the process of opening the Pan Am shelter was rushed, with no public hearing before the emergency contract was awarded, and minimal public review in evaluating the location for fitness.

Senator Avella also noted that the cost to taxpayers to maintain this rundown location, \$3,776.53 per month for each unit, is a red flag that the current system has failed. He pointed to the ongoing quality of life issues and code violations that additionally illustrate the results of this broken process.

### **Senator Avella Sheds Light on Quality of Life Problems and the Conditions at Pan Am**

The Pan Am shelter houses over 700 homeless residents, all of which are families, many with young children. Currently four to five people are placed in each unit, which consists of a single room.

Although NYC Administrative Code §21-124b requires that each unit in a family shelter is equipped with cooking facilities, the Pan Am shelter consists of converted hotel rooms, which do not have kitchens. The Administrative Code additionally requires a ‘minimum of structural change’ for shelter conversions. In order to build kitchens in each unit, major renovations to the facilities would be required, which is in opposition to the law’s requirements.

According to the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), a multitude of violations have piled up at Pan Am. Complaints that the shelter has failed to provide hot water or heat for days or more at a time, reports of bed bug in the unit, peeling lead paint discovered in one unit, and refuse left to sit out in front of the entrance to the children’s play area for extended periods, all plague the Pan Am site. In addition, despite the requirement that childcare services be provided at all family shelter facilities, none are provided at Pan Am.

Senator Avella called on the City to reject any contract that would convert Pan Am to a permanent shelter. Due to the growing number of HPD violations, as well as the failure of Samaritan Village and the Pan Am site to meet the New York City code requirements, Senator Avella believes that Pan Am is not fit for long-term housing for the homeless.

### **Samaritan Village is Unfit to Facilitate Long-Term Housing**

Samaritan Village has had problems regarding its spending at a previous facility. In March, an audit performed by State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli unveiled approximately \$1 million spent in questionable expenses. Inappropriate bonus checks were issued to 203 people, a personal service expense was inappropriately claimed as an executive retirement account, high-end equipment was purchased but never used, and expenses for contractual services were paid despite a lack of any identifiable benefits. Currently, the Office of the State Comptroller is in the process of recovering \$661,793 in improperly paid funds.

Senator Avella declared that it would be a disgrace to award a \$42 million contract for Samaritan Village to operate the Pan Am shelter, when nearly \$1 million in questionable expenses was uncovered earlier this year. He noted that Samaritan Village's questionable history raises many questions as to the ability of the organization to serve as the permanent operator of the Pan Am shelter, particularly on the heels of such a damning report.

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“This is another example of the shelter-industrial complex, which is not in place to end homelessness, but to continue to pay itself. A wiser choice would have been to use that \$42 million for permanent rental subsidies, which would have stabilized the families in the Pan Am shelter instead of maintaining them in an unstable condition,” **said Ms. K, Member of Picture the Homeless.**

“The whole point of the public review process is to make sure that the community has a say in what’s going on in their neighborhood and to make sure that the proposed facility is appropriate and will serve the community’s needs. Through this review process, we would have discovered that the Pan Am hotel does not even meet the city requirements for family shelters because it doesn’t have cooking facilities. Looking at the proposed 5-year, \$42 million contract that DHS intends to sign with Samaritan Village to run the shelter, there are no plans to construct any kitchens for these families. Even DHS Assistant Commissioner Lisa Black acknowledged that the Pan Am hotel would not be suitable for families with children,” **stated Jennifer Chu of Elmhurst United.**

“DHS and Samaritan Village are breaking Department of Sanitation rules and multiple state and city codes. Trash is not in containers, piling up a stack that rivals the last sanitation strike. If Samaritan Village is blatantly breaking the law in public view, what is going on behind closed doors? They do not deserve a signed contract. The true emergency is at DHS. With this broken system, it is not hard to see why each year, with or without a crisis, the homeless problem gets kicked down the road and real solutions are not found,” **said John Schaffer, area resident and member of Elmhurst United.**

“The City and its Mayor and elected officials, such as the Borough President, must be held accountable for this fiasco, the violations of State law, the violation of the rights of homeless families to adequate real housing, and this charade that makes no economic sense to the taxpayers of this city and residents of this State,” **stated Robert Valdez-Clausell, Director of the Newtown Civic Association.**

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