

On Homelessness, Mental Health, and New York City

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Last month Mayor Eric Adams announced that officials will begin hospitalizing more homeless people by involuntarily providing care to those deemed to be in "psychiatric crisis."

In the words of Mayor Adams, "it's time to look at the full picture of New Yorkers' health challenges, and to treat these challenges holistically. It's not enough to care for unhoused New Yorkers in the emergency room and then discharge them if they have no home to recover and heal in. Adults experiencing homelessness have three times as many hospital and emergency visits compared to those with stable housing, so it's time we finally break this vicious cycle."

I am not sure if Mayor Adams' controversial decision to forcibly hospitalize homeless people deemed to be in psychiatric crisis, is a result of his deep concern for the wellbeing of people without homes, or the none-the-less real concern for the future of his political career if he doesn't quickly remove from the streets, subways, ATMs, and parks of New York City, the hundreds of individuals who make these places their homes. Many New Yorkers have been avoiding riding the subway or going to the City altogether, both for safety reasons and to escape the unpleasant experience of seeing people doing their basic needs on the streets.

While I am not sure of the real motivations of our Mayor or of the future success of initiative "Housing for Heath" (there are pending budget cuts that will remove services the city provides to the homeless), I would like to suggest that the Mayor's approach is bringing awareness to something many of us knew already for a long time, since there is a strong interconnection between homelessness and mental illness.

Homelessness doesn't appear overnight. Behind each person without a roof over their heads, there is a sad story – a story which usually includes in different degrees, abuse, neglect, addiction, crime, and mental illness.

Mayor Adams might be able to "bring back the City" by forcibly removing homeless people from New York City streets and subways and taking them to a hospital, but that first step, won't address the increasing phenomenon of homelessness in large metropolitan areas.

What is necessary, is a comprehensive plan, involving compassionate and efficient decision makers, philanthropists, mental health providers, urbanists, social workers, law enforcers, religious and community leaders, and caring citizens with the willingness and disposition to create change.

We are all our brethren's keepers, and as the Mayor knows too well, we are all on the same boat. Either we arrive safely to a good harbor or we sink together. Let's transform a "problem" into an opportunity, for all of us.

A concerned citizen.

Rabbi Manes Kogan