



February 5, 2010

City to Bronx Community About a Homeless Shelter: ‘Not in Your Backyard’

By SAM DOLNICK

In the perpetual battle against homelessness in New York, the [Kingsbridge Heights Community Center](#) in the Bronx was only a bit player, with about 10 beds in its gym. But offering space for even a handful of destitute people meant something to those who benefited from a warm, safe place to sleep, as well as to those who helped provide it.

But this winter, when New York’s homeless population is above 37,000 and shelters are working to increase capacity, the gym now sits empty at night because city officials have ordered the program to close.

The situation stands the traditional not-in-my-backyard fight on its head: Here, the community wanted a homeless shelter, but the city did not, and ordered it shut.

“It’s a slap in the face saying ‘Thanks for volunteering, we don’t need you,’ ” said Charlie Shayne, the center’s longtime director.

The Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, an organization that provides thousands of Bronx residents with everything from prenatal care to senior services, is in an old police station house owned by the city and overseen by the parks department. Last spring, parks officials became aware of the overnight homeless program. They said that they were “legally obligated to discontinue it” because “land dedicated for park purposes cannot be conveyed or used for any other purpose,” according to a statement from the parks department.

A different city agency, the Department of Homeless Services, had been aware of the program and had been providing sheets and food for the homeless men.

The center’s daytime programs were allowed to continue, but the building was not meant to provide housing or sleeping accommodations, parks officials ruled.

Mr. Shayne said he pointed out that the site has “not even a blade of grass. It’s concrete and mortar, the entire thing.” But parks officials would not be swayed, and the program quietly ended.

[G. Oliver Koppell](#), a Bronx councilman, said he tried to work out a compromise with [Adrian Benepe](#), the parks commissioner, but he had no success.

“It seems Kafkaesque, the bureaucratic rule,” Mr. Koppell said. “It’s not an inappropriate place for homeless and it’s been used that way for years. It seems foolish to bar this use.”

The Kingsbridge Heights Community Center began its homeless program nearly 15 years ago when Mr. Shayne and community volunteers — teachers, lawyers and mechanics alike — realized that the small gym, unused at night, might provide homeless men a better, safer night's rest than a city shelter would.

Many other organizations run similar programs. Roughly 300 people across the city sleep in beds provided by religious groups, according to the city.

At the community center, volunteers joined with a Bronx-based social services group, [BronxWorks](#), formerly called the Citizens Advice Bureau, which runs a drop-in center in Hunts Point. The center has no beds, leaving dozens of people to spend the night sleeping in chairs.

And so, three nights a week, staff members there rounded up a group of roughly 10 men and drove them to the community center. They dropped them off at 10 p.m., long after the other programs at the building had ended, and picked them up again at 6 a.m.

Scott Auwarter, who runs BronxWorks's homeless programs, said it tries to find beds in churches and other places for as many people as possible, but, on cold nights, there can be up to 55 people spending the night in chairs. The loss of the gym in Kingsbridge Heights has led to one fewer option, leaving more people to sleep in chairs in Hunts Point.

“When we had those beds, we certainly appreciated them,” Mr. Auwarter said. “Every bed you can get, you appreciate. It's terrible to have to sleep in a chair. Human beings weren't designed to sleep in chairs.”

Ruth Bromberg, 80, of Riverdale, volunteered at the community center for years. She and her husband spent nights there, brought food and recruited others to help out.

The program “showed the concern that people have for the homeless,” she said. The city's decision “was terrible,” she said. “So sad.”

Mr. Shayne said he would like to see the building transferred from the parks department's jurisdiction so the homeless program could resume, but that seemed unlikely.

“We shouldn't lose a facility like this that costs the city zero because of a bureaucratic decision,” he said.

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
