

Interviews with residents of Pamoja House Homeless Shelter in Brooklyn

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9 September 2015

The WSWs spoke recently with several residents of Pamoja House Next Step Shelter, a 200-bed men's shelter in Brooklyn run for the city by the non-profit Black Veterans for Social Justice, Inc.

According to its web site, "Pamoja House specializes in managing a homeless population that was refused from other shelters in New York City and is a 'next-step' facility. Residents of Pamoja House were deemed 'non-compliant' in general population shelters. Approximately half of our residents are formerly incarcerated or had some contact with the criminal justice system. The shelter permits residents from age 18 to 65, but the bulk of the population are quite young, between the ages 18 to 40. Residents of Pamoja House receive case management services and 383 residents are placed in housing that ranges from single room occupancies, to special-needs, subsidized housing to market rate housing."

William Bray, age 50, has lived in the shelter for almost two years. He is employed on a variety of construction and custodial jobs seasonally and works a few hours a week at a neighborhood art center. He also works in and around the shelter performing maintenance jobs. He has two daughters whom he regularly sees, and maintains cordial relations with their mother. He moved to the shelter in order to save money toward getting his own place, but under conditions in which single-room occupancies (SROs) are increasingly unavailable in neighborhoods such as Bedford-Stuyvesant which are being gentrified, it is difficult for him to find a room for \$200-300/month, which is all he can currently afford. He recently had a chance at getting a studio apartment in transitional housing, but needed to prove full-time, on-the-books employment and may not qualify. His caseworker receives a portion of the rental fee for everyone she places in housing.

WB: "The shelter system is designed to be a temporary situation for people who don't have the money to get ahead, so they can save something. Believe me, if I could be in a studio apartment, I wouldn't be in the shelter! But now landlords know they can get \$1,000 a month for a room, plus you have to have a month's security deposit and other fees. How am I going to afford that?"

"Once you get in the shelter, it's like a prison mentality, a prison without locks. I would say that 80 percent of people in the shelter have mental health or substance abuse issues. They might even have enough income from Social Security Disability, but they're scared to live on their own. Some use the shelter system because it is convenient; it takes you out of the picture of being responsible.

Also, there are a lot of people coming out of prison who are mandated to go to the shelter. Parole people come by all the time. They might as well get their own beds in the shelter to make it easier to keep track of people. And there are just some people who are seriously messed up. All these populations aren't supposed to be mixed together, but they are."

WSWS: How do you get into a shelter? Can you just walk in off the street?

WB: "No. There might be a few emergency places you can go, but to be considered 'homeless,' you have to be registered. Everyone has to go through processing at Bellevue [in Manhattan] to get an assessment and case number, and then they assign you to a shelter—there are 1,000 shelters—but the one they assign you is your permanent shelter until you find housing. You're not supposed to be staying anywhere else. You get a cot and a locker with a combo lock provided. At Pamoja, there's maybe 10-12 cots in each room. It's like a prison dorm. You can't stay in the sleeping quarters after 8 a.m., and there's a 10 p.m. curfew. There's a lounge room with a TV you can stay in, but you're supposed to be out during the day working. Everybody says they're working, but 'legit,' on-the-books jobs, maybe 10 percent, if that, have those. A lot of people collect cans, if that's considered work. But there's no income limit. There are guys in there who worked in transit, drove Access-A-Ride vans, but got evicted or their girlfriend put them out and they couldn't make rent, so they're in the shelter."

WSWS: Have you seen this change under de Blasio?

WB: "De Blasio is a flip-flopper. He's lying to millions and is just going to do what he is paid to do. Eventually he's going to buy out public housing and give it to the developers. Bloomberg cut a whole lot of programs, which had a terrible impact. Even the family shelters were overrun, and it always gets worse during the winter. Now, the state is making deals to get people housing—supposedly with these different grants—but if the state would just pay a part of our rent for a year, they'd save money over what the shelter system costs. In a shelter, 'three hots and a cot' is the only thing you are entitled to."

WSWS: What's the best and the worst thing about living in the shelter?

WB: "The best thing is to get out of where you were living, but where the hell are you going to go if you don't have a steady job? The worst thing is the food. The food's terrible! But really, the worst thing about the shelter is the uncaring attitude of the staff.

They're just there for a paycheck. But then, half of them are just one check away from being in the shelter themselves."

Medgar Evers Williams, age 51, has lived at Pamoja House for two and a half years. He became homeless after his father sold the family apartment where he lived in Harlem that had been in the family since his childhood, in order to send the youngest child to college. Medgar is employed as a porter three days a week for a couple of hours a day. He isn't married and has no kids. Like many shelter residents, he suffers from diabetes that is inadequately treated.

WSWS: What would you need to be able to get out of the shelter?

MEW: "I'm ready to get out, but to do so I need full-time employment. It's not that there isn't housing, but they [the housing authorities] go with people they already know, and the guys they know get public assistance money. The landlord gets a cut off the top of that, so they prefer to take those guys. They showed me a place: it was like two feet by five feet. You got to be kidding me! I don't need a big place, but the shelter is better than that!"

WSWS: What do you think of the management of the shelter? Have you seen this change under de Blasio?

MEW: "There are guys who've been there more than five years, and they haven't found them housing. But I'm not leaving one shelter just to go back to another. I need a better option than what they're offering. I think de Blasio is just taking his time, and homeless single men are the lowest priority, behind homeless families. But I don't think he cares about the homeless in general.

"When I was young, they [Black Nationalists] tried to get me into politics, but my name, Medgar Evers, because of who he was, carries a lot of weight and scares a lot of people. A lot of things I have to say might get me killed. So I stayed away from that. But anyone in their right mind today has got to know that something is not right, working people can barely buy food, have no security, can barely pay rent. At least in the shelter you have a certain security. It's not the same for working people as it used to be. And that's true all over the world, including other countries like Greece. Things are on a serious verge of collapse."

Griffin ("Jonesy") Jones, age 65, has been homeless for five years. Originally from Fairfield County, Connecticut, Jonesy describes "growing up on the Yale campus" and graduating with honors from Notre Dame High School. Jonesy relocated after the economy collapsed in 2008, and he was laid off from his job as a dispatch supervisor for First Student bus company in New Haven.

After he lost his apartment, Jonesy came down to New York City, "with nothing but the shirt on my back," hoping to find more job opportunities than he would have had living with his mother in a rural area near North Haven. He has participated in training programs for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA's) services and the Parks Department, but has had difficulty getting full-time work, in part because of living in the shelter system. He was unable to commute to his designated Parks locations when he was abruptly transferred to a remote shelter in the South Bronx originally designated for those in need of treatment for alcoholism and substance abuse. After the Bronx shelter was redesignated for sex-offenders, he was transferred back

to Pamoja House.

GJ: "What I need to move out of the shelter is a full-time permanent position, and that is hard to get. You need three evaluations to get a job with the MTA—it took me a year and a half to get just one. And then the Parks Department is seasonal, six months and you're out, so after that you lose your apartment and are back in the shelter again. The shelter system gives you no help getting housing, or at least they don't want to deal with someone like me who doesn't have a set income from SSD [Social Security Disability] or SSI [Supplemental Security Income]. But I'd rather be here than [in the half-way houses] where they are sending you. There you might have a bunch of psychos on the floor, or dudes smoking crack or K2 who come in your door. You can't find the landlord. Those conditions are worse than the shelter big time!"

WSWS: What's the best and the worst thing about living in the shelter? Do you think there is affordable housing available?

GJ: "The best thing is having a roof over your head, getting out of the weather. But you don't get too much sleep, the bathrooms are all jammed up and gross, and the food, forget about it!

"There is definitely a shortage of decent, affordable housing, and there is no affordable housing around here anymore. The house I just did [working gut renovation] will be going for \$2 million when it is done. There has been gentrification big time because Manhattan is too expensive. Because of that there has been a migration to places like Brooklyn. But the mix is like oil and water in this neighborhood. If they don't know you and they see you on their street, they call the cops on you. The only way to create an even mixture is to provide everyone with good jobs and an education. You have to be able to communicate. If you do good work with integrity and willingness, you win respect. But people need full-time employment."



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