

BHA residents challenge police force elimination

Justin Rice

Despite an emergency funding request last winter that moved \$2 million from the city's financial reserves to cover the cost of maintaining the Boston Housing Authority Police through September, the BHA, faced with federal budget cuts, is moving ahead with a plan to remove security from 16 developments that currently have 24-hour patrols.

The move is not sitting well for many residents, particularly seniors who live in those properties. Critics of the policing change were among those who attended a hearing Tuesday afternoon at City Hall to protest the cuts.

"I have crazy people around me," Alford Noels, who lives in BHA housing in Roxbury, testified during the hearing on Tuesday afternoon. "They're like vultures. I'm asking you guys, please don't let this insanity happen."

During the hearing, Sarah Hall of West Roxbury said her development, Rockland Towers, doesn't have security guards.

"If people put crime watches in their building and work through City Hall and work together, try hard and take an interest, they wouldn't need security guards," she said. "Our building is very, very coordinated. Together, we know when someone is out and when someone is in. When a stranger is in the building, we know where they're going. If these other developments would get together and start crime watches I think they would be very successful."

Bill McGonagle, a BHA administrator, didn't exactly make that same argument during his testimony, but he did say that new technology could be a more efficient way to police buildings, especially given the current budget crunch at the federal level.

"There's no secret that the current administration in Washington has abandoned the public housing programs," he said. "We're funded at 82 percent of what's needed. We have 18 percent less than what [the federal government] accessed as our minimal need. However, I do believe we should explore technological options that provide better security. We need to start taking advantage of this technology for the betterment of our public housing in Boston."

McGonagle's colleague, Jim McCarthy, gave a presentation outlining some of the technology available for security, including an electronic device that allows only residents of a building access to their building.

City Councilor Sam Yoon — who called for the hearing along with councilors Chuck Turner, Charles Yancey and Felix Arroyo — argued that the security guards are necessary, especially since non-elderly, typically disabled, residents live with HUD-assisted seniors. Both populations are extremely vulnerable, he said.

The councilors also argued that the Boston Police Department has issued reports saying the BHA's plan won't provide an adequate level of security. Yoon and his colleagues say that not only do elders, by law, have to have security guards or a comparable plan that has been approved by the city, but that the BHA is only acting out of fiscal concerns.

"Would it be fair to say a lot of what's driving this is a shortage of federal funds?" Yoon asked McGonagle, who estimated that, under the current model, it would continue to cost roughly \$600 per person, per year, to provide security to all 1,300 seniors living in BHA developments.

"It's not exclusively driven by money," McGonagle said. "You can not put a price tag on the safety of our elderly. If I thought this plan put our elderly in jeopardy I would not advocate for it."

Yoon agreed that the technology aspect was a "no brainer," but had reservations about the finances at work.

"Ongoing operating costs of \$10 a day for each individual to feel safe... doesn't feel like that much," Yoon said.

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