

BHA drops camera plan for housing Residents' protests about safety succeed

By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | August 22, 2007

Facing mounting criticism from senior citizens worried about their safety, the Boston Housing Authority yesterday dropped its plan to replace some of its daytime security personnel with surveillance cameras.

BHA officials had proposed the move, saying they could enhance security and save \$650,000 if they removed daytime security guards at 13 of the city's housing developments, where about 1,800 elderly and disabled residents live, and installed cameras instead.

Residents of the projects reacted fiercely and came by the busload to a recent public hearing, packing the City Council chambers and wielding signs in opposition to the proposal.

With more crowds expected at rallies today, BHA officials said they planned to withdraw its proposal.

"At the end of the day, policies implemented by government officials need to have the support of those most directly impacted," BHA deputy administrator Bill McGonagle said in an interview last night. "Although we think our policy was a good one, we didn't think it had sufficient support from the elderly and disabled residents to implement it."

The proposal would have eliminated the security guards stationed at the housing developments between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. and instead installed cameras and other technologies, such as lobby phones and pullcords, that residents could use to summon housing authority police.

McGonagle said the agency has been running over budget and had hoped to reduce its operating deficit partly by eliminating daytime guards. He said the agency this year will tap into reserves and next year will seek other sources of revenue or other expenses to cut.

The city is expected to publicly announce the decision today at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Towers in Roxbury. Community activists had planned to meet at the development to rally against the proposal, but they got word last night that their rally would become a celebration of victory.

"This is something that has made the residents feel heard and feel more secure in their homes," said Carolyn Villers, a community organizer at the Massachusetts Senior Action Council. "It's great news that's being celebrated throughout the developments."

Earl Frost, a 64-year-old blind resident at the Frederick Douglass development in Roxbury, said the security personnel have been vital for keeping the housing developments safe. He said he recently dropped his keys and could not find them until a security guard noticed he needed help.

"We were just afraid for safety in general," he said last night. "I've told some of the tenants, and they are ecstatic. They're clapping their hands and praising the Lord and everything. I was so glad because it let us know that wherever you are, if you work together for one cause, there is power in numbers."

Mayor Thomas M. Menino also praised the decision last night.

"He always made it very clear that while he appreciated the use of technology in our housing authority, the priority must lie in the safety of the residents," said his spokeswoman, Dot Joyce.

City councilors had also expressed concern that residents' safety could have been compromised with fewer security personnel.

Councilor at Large Sam Yoon, who chairs the Council's Committee on Housing, said: "This is a big victory for Boston's senior citizens and people with disabilities, who rely on security guards to help ensure their safety and well-being."