

## Human eyes, not electric ones

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THE SAFETY of some 1,800 elderly and disabled residents could be jeopardized because the Boston Housing Authority wants to replace day-shift security guards at 13 housing developments with cameras and other technology -- a move that would save \$650,000. Efficiencies at public agencies are important to seek out, but this move is too risky for this population.

No matter how advanced the technology -- and the BHA is also proposing lobby phones and pullcords that could be used to summon housing authority police -- machines can't provide the same level of protection as people. At a public hearing in July, one blind public housing resident told a revealing story: He dropped his keys. Had he been alone with a security camera, he would have had to wait for someone to come along and help. It's a small example of how security guards can spot trouble and respond immediately, whether it's to dropped keys or to someone trying to enter a building to do harm. The hearing will reconvene Wednesday before the City Council.

Housing authority officials insist that humans would still be involved in keeping buildings safe. Building managers and aides would play a role in daytime security. In addition, other housing authority employees would be, as they are now, in and out of buildings. Using new technology security systems would be a chance to put the authority's limited resource to the best use, says BHA deputy administrator Bill McGonagle.

Among public housing residents who defend the proposal is Stephen Laverty, who serves on the resident advisory board. He argues that the technology system would provide protection and save money. And saving is crucial, says Laverty, because federal funding for housing authorities is drying up. He says residents can help by being floor captains or just being attentive neighbors.

A federal formula sets operating funds for public housing authorities. But because of budget constraints, the BHA only expects to receive 82 percent of what it should.

Nonetheless, it's important, especially in neighborhoods with significant criminal activity, to have guards whose dedicated job is to focus on security.

City Councilor Sam Yoon has briefed Senator Edward Kennedy on the shortfall in funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. City Councilor Chuck Turner suggests that Boston could provide stopgap funding, until more federal money is available. But ultimately, the federal government should fund guards *and* technology, so that elderly and disabled residents can have peace of mind.

It falls to William Good, the commissioner of Boston's Inspectional Services Department, to make the final decision. He should keep the guards on the job day and night. ■