

Letting their guard down: BHA plans to ax security officers at elderly housing

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The safety and peace of mind of some 1,800 elderly and disabled residents could hang in the balance because of a Boston Housing Authority cost-cutting plan to replace security guards with surveillance cameras in 13 senior complexes, the Herald has learned.

The proposal has golden-agers spitting mad.

"They'd rather save a buck than save a life. When those cameras break, I guarantee they won't fix them," Glenn Williams, 53, said yesterday at Roxbury's Martin Luther King Jr. Towers, where the oldest resident is 98.

Federally funded BHA stands to save \$650,000 a year by axing up to three unarmed sentries at the developments between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday through Friday - the very hours most elders are up and about.

Councilor-at-large Sam Yoon chairs the Boston City Council's Committee on Housing and has called a meeting for 2 p.m. Wednesday to pore over newly compiled crime statistics from BHA's targeted buildings.

Between Jan. 1 and July 24 of this year there were only 16 reported crimes - mainly burglaries but one rape - in all 13 developments under the existing security arrangement. That compares to 1,963 serious crimes in the immediate surrounding neighborhoods, including seven murders, 24 rapes and 195 robberies.

It's that surrounding environment of crime that seniors like Frances Sawyer, 59, who suffers from glaucoma, fears will move into her building.

"We need all the security we can get. We need security on top of security," said Sawyer.

Gary Downing, 62, angrily agreed.

"I don't want the cameras," Downing said. "You can't talk to no camera when you have an emergency."

Said Yoon, "Shame on us, from the federal government on down to the city, if we let things get so bad as to take away something as basic to your home as your sense of security."

Making matters worse, Yoon said the BHA Police Department could run out of funding by October, as they are only operating now thanks to a \$2.1 million emergency shot in the arm from the city.

BHA officials reached yesterday referred comment to BHA administrator Sandra Henriquez and a spokeswoman, who could not be reached. Yoon said Henriquez told his committee the feds have slashed her agency's budget by \$29 million since 1995.

Still, Yoon said, a camera is "not even an effective deterrent. The deterrent is the real live person at the front door."

Council President Maureen Feeney said, "We're really talking about the most vulnerable group of people in our society. There's all kinds of drug activity, prostitution and intimidation. That's why we absolutely, positively need to have a commitment to the 24-hour security service."

One BHA security guard, speaking on condition of anonymity, called the plan "utterly ridiculous. A camera can't stop someone from coming in with their friends or a hooker from wandering through the door. It's not safe in these buildings as it is."