

Build the Block Meeting Focuses on Crime-Ridden West Chelsea Corridor

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Breaking Ground Team Leader Courtney Singh and Officer Gregory Edgar addressed outreach efforts. |

Photo by Winnie McCroy

BY WINNIE McCROY | Community members came together at Penn South on the evening of August 20 for a live meeting of the Build the Block coalition. The event brought NYPD's Neighborhood Coordination Officers (NCOs) together with locals concerned about the safety of Chelsea and Midtown South. Many voiced concerns regarding the problems with petty crime, drug use, and vagrancy around the W. 21st St. and Eighth Ave. corridor.

"We want to build a relationship with you guys," said NCO Gregory Edgar, who has worked at the 10th Precinct for 14 years. "Whatever we write down on this

list tonight is our assignment for the next month. You'll see us on foot patrol, dedicated to addressing what we discuss tonight.”

For the past few years, he's been teamed up with NCO Addy Fernandez, who said he's served at the 10th Precinct for 13 years. The officers work the precinct's Sector B, which covers 21st to 29th Sts. from Seventh Ave. to the West Side Highway.

Said Edgar, “I consider this my community, where I learned to be a cop, and there's no better place to be a police officer.” He noted that he and Fernandez would now only be focused on neighborhood safety, no longer helping detectives investigate crimes—presumably due to the NYPD's move in June to disband the police department's plainclothes anti-crime units and reassign the officers to other duties, including neighborhood policing initiatives.

As noted in earlier Chelsea Community News reports, the issues neighbors quickly brought to the NCOs attention were those related to the influx of transient drug activity in the 21st St. corridor.

“We're really having a lot of problems,” said Anibal Diaz, looking jaunty in his straw Panama hat. “I have had to run them off the block. I don't want to, but I have lived there for 60 years, and I don't like to see the older people scared to walk down the street. So I stand out here protecting my corner to keep them from hanging out. None of them come from here, all they're doing is taking craps on our steps, and popping the light bulbs out from the street scaffoldings so they can have sex and smoke crystal meth out there. They do this on the constant.”

Diaz and others said that transients had even busted out the bulbs on the heavy-duty spotlight the NYPD had installed at the corner of Eighth Ave. and W. 21st St. shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Replied NCO Edgar, “We will have an increased presence on that block. I know [it] has been an issue, and we have made 19 arrests there, including three for trespassing in just the past few weeks. But the problem we're having is, with trespassing, we arrest them and they go over to the precinct at 20th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, and then they're out on the streets two hours later.”

“Nobody can say you're not doing your job,” said a man in a purple shirt. “But it's because of that corner store. The owner is selling crack pipes from underneath the counter, and the dealers come over there because they see that's

where the customers are hanging out.”

NCO Fernandez said while he couldn't get into details, the NYPD was conducting an investigation of that corner. But he also noted that the owner of that deli had been very helpful in the past whenever they needed access to his video camera files, giving officers the password and letting them view the video alone to identify the individual who they believe committed the crime.

“Most people we arrest from that corner is because of video we got from that deli,” said Fernandez.

“And while we can't arrest them based on a video—we can't arrest them without evidence—it's good intel,” added Edgar. “We get a description or see that and then we know the players... what you don't see is the arrests that happen after the fact. Sometimes we don't catch them the first time, but they steal again, and we do eventually get 'em.”

NCO Edgar encouraged local residents to call his personal cell number at 917-900-6370 with a description of those people engaged in criminal activities, noting that information gleaned at a prior Build the Block meeting directly led to the arrest of an individual stealing packages from W. 21st St.

Groups Reach Out to Offer Services, Not Many Accept | “I want to know what you can do about the homeless problem,” said a woman with a black bob, who reported being concerned about a “mentally ill screamer, who could be violent” who had been hanging around on her block.

Edgar encouraged the woman to “call 911 if he was a danger to himself or anyone else, and we'll determine if he's an emotionally disturbed person.” If the problem is open-air drug use, the officers encouraged people to call 911 to report it. If the problem is an enclave of people sleeping on the street, they said they would call DHS to handle the issue.

The woman with the black bob asked the officers if they would pay particular attention to the movie theater near the corner of 23rd Street and Eighth Ave., which she said “draws a lot of people now that it's closed. It's never cleaned up and particularly at night, things get a little uncomfortable walking by there.”

The officers added the area to their list, and NCO Edgar encouraged folks to reach out to them to report any sort of problem, saying they would forward it to the right agency. In the past, he and NCO Fernandez had set up various cleanups

with DHS to relocate those who had set up camp on the street, usually under scaffoldings and sidewalk sheds. Now, he said, DHS and Breaking Ground would do that sort of work.

“You have to remember that these people are *people*, they have histories and stories, and we do our best to break through the barriers and get these people inside so we can help them. And we take anyone on,” said Courtney Singh, Team Leader of the outreach organization Breaking Ground. The group works under the Manhattan Outreach Consortium, contracted by the Department of Homeless Services to cover the north side of 23rd St. to the south side of 45th St., river to river.

Said Singh, “They have been reluctant to go to shelters, because it’s a scary time for everyone. And all the places these people used to go to seek a reprieve, like libraries and cafes, are closed now. The services are at a minimum, although we’ve been out there 24/7 since the shutdown. It’s kind of an eye opener for us as a society. We don’t usually see this many people outside and now look what’s going on here. I’m super-afraid the homeless rates are going to skyrocket after this.”

Singh said their staff is diverse in order to help make connections with all sorts of people, adding that while most people are open to talking, that does not necessarily mean they will access the services offered.

“Once we build a rapport with them, they are more willing to accept services,” said Singh.

She said she had seen a lot more transgender females out in the street, especially in Midtown, who she assumed were sex workers. Singh was concerned about their safety, saying, “So many people are getting hurt, especially with the killings of trans black females, which is the majority of whom I’m seeing outside. There are some LGBTQ shelters and safe havens, and they do allow them to choose which shelter they feel safer in. Thank God we’re in New York, and they’re a little more open-minded here.”

Breaking Ground welcomes anyone, from couples to singles, and Singh says if her group can’t help them, they’ll refer them to people who can. She said NCOs Edgar and Fernandez had emailed her with several cases, that they had successfully gotten someone off the street two weeks ago, and that they have worked on several of those cleanups with the NYPD. Unfortunately, the

unhoused have already returned to one of the spots. But the NCOs said they can't let that deter them.

"If you see drug use, call 911. If you see someone loitering on your stoop and they're not leaving, call 311," said Edgar. "Let us know if it's a chronic issue and we'll talk to them while we're out on foot patrol."

Several other neighbors complained about bike traffic not going the right way, or not stopping at lights, and NCO Fernandez said that "while we've given out hundreds of tickets for this, we can't just jump out in front of moving cyclists, because that puts people in danger."

The officers also promised to address issues of men hanging out in front of a local erotic bookstore where one neighbor lady said they would "accost you or say something to you, or just be leering at you."



L to R, NCOs Gregory Edgar and Addy Fernandez, along with a member of the 10th Precinct response team, sent by dispatchers to your home in case of emergency. | Photo by Winnie McCroy

More Community Outreach? | The NCOs followed proper protocol for the meeting, taking people's temperature before admitting them entrance, getting their contact information and distributing masks to all attendees. Still, only about a dozen community members attended the meeting, perhaps due to fears

about COVID-19.

In fact, NY State Senator Brad Hoylman called on the NYPD to eliminate the risk of transmission by offering a call-in option for community meetings. On June 29, Hoylman and colleagues sent a letter to NYPD Chief of Patrol Fausto Pichardo expressing concerns about these large in-person meetings; Pichardo responded that he would permit remote access for subsequent Build the Block meetings.

“In the middle of the worst public health crisis of our lifetimes, our government should be leading by example in providing remote options for participation in community meetings to protect vulnerable New Yorkers from infection,” said Hoylman in an Aug. 21 statement.

“Earlier this summer, with public safety issues a major concern for many of our constituents, I helped lead a letter among my elected colleagues to the NYPD urging precincts to offer at least a call-in option at all community meetings moving forward. While we received an encouraging response from the NYPD promising changes in August, it is extremely unfortunate that precincts are still holding in-person meetings with no remote accessibility. The NYPD must make good on its commitment and provide remote access for community meetings. Our residents should not have to choose between protecting their health and joining their neighbors to discuss issues of public safety.”

Illustrating the old adage that you just can't please anyone, one meeting attendee actually demanded *more* in-person events, asking the officers when they would be holding their next outreach or “National Night Out” event. NCO Edgar said that although they had held these kinds of events in the past at Fulton Houses, as well as a kickball game at a nearby recreation center, they would not be doing so, because of the pandemic. Other precincts had held them, she noted.

“Every precinct is different,” replied Edgar. “We will get back to it, but right now, we are prioritizing safety from COVID, and we don't have the personnel.”

Edgar said that the 10th Precinct had lost more than a dozen officers through retirement or attrition since last year, and had about 130 currently on patrol. Sadly, he said that those officers would not be replaced.

And although the quality of life and nuisance crimes are on the rise in Chelsea, thankfully, the NCOs said that violent crime overall is down in the area.

“We are up in burglaries, but grand larcenies are down, because there are not as many people leaving their purses and valuables lying around,” said Edgar. “Also, unlike in other places in the city, we are not suffering much gun violence in Chelsea.”

Added Fernandez, “When you compare us to other precincts, there are more quality of life issues, but certainly not the same violence as other precincts are experiencing.”

For more information on the next Build the Block meeting, click here.

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