

## OPINION / COMMENTARY

By Alexander Roberts

# Battling the 'homeless shelter' phantom



A homeless-transition project at the former Hampton Inn hotel in Jericho has drawn opposition. Credit: Charles Eckert

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As executive director of Community Housing Innovations, the nonprofit agency seeking to open the Jericho Family Support Center, I've spent my 30-year career battling a phantom. This phantom has no basis in our reality on Long Island, and yet is powerful enough to move hundreds to hysteria, powerful enough to raise \$86,000 on a GOFUNDME page in just a few days in Oyster Bay, powerful enough for good, rational people to circle the wagons, thinking they must protect their homes and their children from what is an unfounded danger.

The phantom is called the "homeless shelter." Despite decades of success — the creation and current operation of 30 shelters in five counties — I have never been able to shake the image with the reality. The homeless shelter conjures up barracks with rows of cots, random violence and chaos that do not exist in suburban New York, or dystopian landscapes in Portland or Los Angeles, where twisted policies have allowed drug-infested camps of the homeless to exist under bridges or in parks, in the name of compassion.

Let me be clear about what the facts support. The Long Island reality of homeless shelters, regulated by the counties and New York State, bears no resemblance to the nightmare in our imaginations or the camps on the West Coast. The majority of shelter residents are mothers and children who simply need help, and the proper response from rational humans should be the same as Jericho school board President Bill Ferro and Nassau County Executive Laura Curran: "How can we ease their suffering? How may we ensure that these children get the education they need with as little disruption as possible? And how do we remove the four "welfare motels" in Jericho where the homeless languish without help for an average of two years, and replace them with a service-rich, secure shelter that moves them to permanent housing in an average of six

to nine months?” That is why Nassau County has supported our plan to create the Jericho Family Support Center, which will remove three welfare hotels and replace them with a New York State certified shelter.

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The phantom, however, is powerful, and it has a name thanks to Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Kahneman, who wrote “Thinking Fast and Slow.” The “availability heuristic,” or “availability bias” is all about human psychology, “a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to a given person’s mind when evaluating a specific topic, concept, method or decision.”

Think about the movie “Jaws,” which created a mental image so memorable it emptied beaches in 1975, even though the number of unprovoked shark attacks worldwide is tiny — only 64 last year.

It is why New York State explicitly prevents a locality from imposing its local code to thwart the creation of state-regulated homeless shelters under the law of “preemption,” and why I have never asked for or received a “homeless shelter permit” that does not exist anywhere on Long Island and never will.

None of the shelters we operate — from single family houses to a 350-bed former hotel — has a local permit for a homeless shelter. Their existence emanates from New York State’s constitutional recognition of society’s responsibility to care for the needy. It is up to people of good will to get the facts and act with compassion for our brothers and sisters in need.

*Alexander Roberts is executive director of Community Housing Innovations, a social services nonprofit organization.*

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