April 13, 2020

Honorable Supervisors
County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors
Board Operations Division, Executive Office
500 W. Temple Street, Room 383
Los Angeles, CA 90012

SUBJECT: APRIL 14, 2020 BOARD AGENDA ITEM S-1, STATUS REPORT ON THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY SHELTER CRISIS AND HOUSING INITIATIVE FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Dear Board of Supervisors:

On behalf of the Lawndale City Council, I write to express the City’s deep concern and disappointment with the County’s method for introducing and implementing its “Project Roomkey” program. The City was informed on April 9, 2020, that the County had signed an agreement with the Best Western Plus South Bay Hotel in Lawndale to become a temporary homeless shelter. This agreement was negotiated and executed in complete secrecy and without seeking any input from the City. This program is now expected to begin operations on April 15, 2020 (i.e., only one week after its formal announcement) without any City coordination.

While Project Roomkey is a well-intended program to help the most vulnerable homeless in Los Angeles County during the COVID-19 global pandemic, it could cause irreparable harm to the Lawndale community as many fundamental questions have yet to be properly addressed. The City is particularly concerned with the following:

1. The potential public safety impacts from up to 97 new homeless guests being brought into our community. The County’s program cannot confine its homeless guests to their hotel rooms, and it does not address how it will manage loitering in neighborhoods and in our commercial district. Unfortunately, the City has to deal with public health and safety issues everyday related to the homeless crisis in Los Angeles County, and increasing the number of homeless in our community will only exacerbate existing problems. The City will undoubtedly be forced to use its own resources for added law enforcement patrols around the hotel, for clean-up, and responding to complaints from the community. There is no plan in place to reimburse the City for costs associated with the County’s program. The County must assume this financial responsibility.

2. This program is moving forward to address COVID-19 and regional issues, but does not help to resolve the City’s existing homeless problems in the process. The temporary homeless shelter will amount to a tremendous burden on the City without any local benefit.
3. Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) is not specifically addressed in the program guidelines. The City relies on TOT revenue from local hotels to help off-set costs for serving local tourists. As the County will paying for the use of hotel rooms, TOT must be paid as any other hotel guest would be expected.

4. The program puts the hotel at odds with the City. As a hotel, its use is subject to Lawndale Municipal Code provisions, and its development conditions of approval. The hotel was not approved to be a temporary homeless shelter, and therefore, the County’s program has caused the hotel to be in violation of City policies. As a result, the hotel is now at risk of losing its City use permit and business license.

5. The program lacks a well-thought out exit plan for the disposition of homeless guests at the end of the COVID-19 crisis. The City is not confident that the County will be able to properly transport homeless guests to regular shelters or group homes once the contract with the hotel expires. Without an expressed plan, the City is concerned that the County will have no other choice than to evict homeless guests from the hotel onto Lawndale streets. This will result in the City having to accept an additional and disproportionate share of homeless individuals because of the County’s ill-conceived program.

While the County is making a good-faith effort to resolve one problem, it fails to recognize that it is creating several more for cities like Lawndale. The County intentionally left cities out of the planning process for Project Roomkey as a matter of expediency, and now it cannot expect cities to simply accept the consequences. The City will explore administrative and legal remedies to prevent Project Roomkey, as one option. As another, the City asks that the Board to hold off from opening its temporary homeless shelter in Lawndale and work with our staff to develop specific program mitigations to everyone’s satisfaction.

Thank you in advance for considering the above. Please contact me at (310) 973-3200 or kchun@lawndalecity.org with any questions, and to initiate further discussion.

Sincerely,

Kevin M. Chun

Kevin M. Chun  
City Manager

C: City Council
The Honorable Gavin Newsom  
Governor, State of California  
California State Capitol  
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173  
Sacramento, CA 95814

SUBJECT: PROJECT ROOMKEY IMPLEMENTATION

Dear Governor Newsom:

This is one of the most dynamic periods in the history of America and your leadership of our State has been critical for communities all across California. The State has moved fast to roll out Project Roomkey to place COVID-19 at-risk homeless persons in hotels all over California. In Los Angeles County, the City of Lawndale is hosting one such facility at a now-converted Best Western and has been informed that we will have a second Project Roomkey hotel soon, just down the street from the Best Western. I write to you today to share a few observations from the front lines of this program’s rollout in hopes that they may inform its ongoing implementation and future approaches for wide-scale homelessness initiatives.

To provide some background, Lawndale’s Best Western hotel has 97 rooms. The hotel began operating on April 15th and took in the first guests on April 23rd. As of today, it now has 65 residents in 60 rooms. The second hotel, which does not yet have a target opening date, will have a capacity to shelter even more people. Lawndale is a small, densely populated, low income and underserved city of 33,000 residents in just under two square miles. Once these two hotels are rolled out we will likely have the highest density of Project Roomkey rooms in all of Los Angeles County.

The County of Los Angeles is spearheading the implementation process for Project Roomkey, including locating and contracting with the hotels, contracting with homeless service providers, medical staff and security, determining who is to be housed where, and bringing homeless people to the chosen facility.

As an elected leader of our small and lower-income community who has been navigating this process, and has the scars to prove it, I share the following thoughts and ideas with you:
Spread the Hotels Out
There is great risk that most of the motels and hotels used throughout California for Project Roomkey will be in lower income areas because those hotels are more likely to accept the low room rates being offered. If that comes to pass, Project Roomkey will have concentrated these homeless populations in communities that already have economic difficulties. As policy experts know, creating high concentration project areas results in worse outcomes than diffusing the facilities throughout communities - similar to how low-income housing units work best when co-mingled with market-rate housing.

Interagency Communications is Critical
Communication between the counties and cities is critical. After an initial approach that asked for forgiveness rather than permission, it sounds as if the County of Los Angeles is now favoring proactive communications. This was a hard-learned lesson in my City of Lawndale. Failure to communicate and respond to questions will only raise suspicion and concern in communities, both with residents and with local elected leaders. Outlining timelines and communicating program details and points for collaboration with cities is important and should be part of the program’s roll out. It is in your power to outline these expectations to the counties.

Eliminate the Uncertainty around Permanence
Uncertainty about the intent to make these Project Roomkey facilities permanent shelters is also raising significant concerns within host communities. The perception is that, once these hotels are converted for Project Roomkey, they will not revert back to regular hotels. Speculation that the State could simply buy and convert hotels, or other hints of more permanence, is causing concern. This not only has an impact on transient occupancy tax (TOT) revenues relied upon by cities, but also represents a huge land use change with unintended consequences for each community. Project Roomkey, in the context of responding to COVID-19, is understood as a temporary solution to a (hopefully) temporary public health crisis. It will be deeply concerning if the result is, instead, permanent homeless shelters created with no community engagement and completely bypassing local control and land use principles. If the perception is that each Project Roomkey hotel is a potential permanent homeless shelter, then every community will be strongly resistant to a hotel being used in their city, without their input and regardless of the location. Why not take that option off the table to remove that political reticence?
Outline an Exit Strategy
There is currently no real plan for the hotel occupants once Project Roomkey concludes. This could be a result of simply moving fast, but it leaves one of two impressions: 1) the hotel occupants will be left on the streets of the communities where the Project Roomkey hotels are located, creating a large influx of new homeless into communities, or 2) there is no intent for Project Roomkey to stop using these hotels for a long time. Cities would be reassured to know that experts at the State level are working with counties to identify a clear exit plan that can be shared with the Project Roomkey hotel host communities.

The City of Lawndale is available to share with your office the details of our experience and offer constructive suggestions to your staff for improvement. I also invite you to come to Lawndale to tour the facilities in our city should you find yourself in Southern California in the coming weeks.

Thank you for pushing California forward and listening to voices from cities to help create a California for all. I hope you and your family remain healthy and safe and wish you all the success as Governor to see California through this pandemic.

Sincerely,

R. Pullen-Miles
Mayor, City of Lawndale

C: Lawndale City Council
   Senator Steven Bradford
   Assembly Member Autumn Burke
   County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors
May 14, 2020

The Honorable Board of Supervisors  
County of Los Angeles  
500 West Temple Street, Suite 383  
Los Angeles, CA 90012  

SUBJECT: RESPONSE TO PROJECT ROOMKEY LOS ANGELES TIMES ARTICLE

Dear Board of Supervisors:

The goals of Project Roomkey are admirable and important. In the fog of the COVID-19 crisis, the City of Lawndale understands the County is moving quickly to address the imminent health and safety threat to our homeless population, and we are interested in playing a role in the County’s overall homeless efforts.

However, the City will soon have not one, but two Project Roomkey hotels operating within our two square mile boundary. The first, a Best Western hotel which is currently in operation, has 97 rooms, began operating on April 15th, and took in its first homeless guests on April 23rd. It now has 102 homeless guests in 93 rooms. The second yet to-be-disclosed hotel will add additional Project Roomkey homeless guests in our community. Lawndale is a small, densely populated, low income and underserved city of 33,000 residents in just under two square miles. Once these two hotels are rolled out we will likely have the highest density of Project Roomkey rooms in all of Los Angeles County. I provide this as context for the following comments to the Board of Supervisors.

In the April 23, 2020 edition of the Los Angeles Times, Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas was quoted in a story titled ‘We aren’t the dumping ground: Homeless people fleeing coronavirus meet NIMBY resistance,’ as stating: “I am frankly surprised by it,” he said of [Lawndale’s] opposition. “This is when people’s values are put to the test and this is when you learn who is willing to help address this crisis in a constructive and humanitarian way.”

This is not a question of values; this is a question of trust. The City’s negative reaction should not have been a surprise considering how the County’s plans were sprung upon us without notification or discussion. The City feels a deep sense of disappointment that the County did not engage with us in advance to hear our questions and understand our concerns. That took the intervention of a federal judge.
Trust was further undermined when in the middle of discussions with the County about the first Project Roomkey hotel, the City learned of the second hotel planned for Lawndale.

Supervisor Ridley-Thomas further commented that putting homeless persons in hotels in our community was a "no brainer." With all due respect to the Supervisor, the County's failure to communicate and plan for Project Roomkey as a partner with the City is the root of the conflict and is exactly what has brought us to this point.

As a City, we were forced to take a stand to protect our community by considering our administrative and legal options. If not for the City's consideration of such drastic actions, we may not have achieved what we were originally denied – County engagement to discuss Project Roomkey with the City. We appreciate that the County is now working and talking with cities before signing agreements with hotels. Again, however, this was not a courtesy afforded to Lawndale.

In an effort to rebuild the bridge between the City and the County, we hope for constructive collaboration moving forward. The following are our specific concerns with Project Roomkey. City staff continues to work with County staff to reach agreement on these items, but these are also important for consideration as the County continues to implement Project Roomkey in other cities.

- Provide a written plan and identify resources to facilitate post-Project Roomkey transition of homeless guests to other long-term or permanent housing facilities, and ensure homeless guests are not abandoned on host city streets.

- Affirm that Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) will be paid as a component of contractual agreements with hotels. TOT is a critical revenue source for Lawndale and if not paid during the term of Project Roomkey, it could amount to a loss of approximately $50,000 per month for the City (for two hotels).

- Clarify the staffing plans for the operations and security of the hotel and surrounding community.

- When starting work in a new city, advise how many rooms in the hotel will be made available to chronically homeless persons from the host city with the goal of removing as many, if not all, homeless from local streets.

- Devise a process to avoid saturating communities with Project Roomkey hotels to ensure equity in community allocation of these facilities.

We hope these suggestions will make the rollout smoother in other communities, creating an approach that maintains positive relations between cities and the County, without the unnecessary distractions of litigation and negative press.
The City is available to discuss these ideas and future lessons that we will learn in the coming weeks as we host two Project Roomkey hotels. We also invite the Board of Supervisors to join us for a tour of the hotels so we can observe their operations together, focused on achieving the best outcome possible.

Sincerely,

R. Pullen-Miles, Mayor

James H. Osborne, City Councilmember

Dan Reid, City Councilmember

C: Supervisor Hilda L. Solis, First District
   Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, Second District
   Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, Third District
   Supervisor Janice Hahn, Fourth District
   Supervisor Kathryn Barger, Fifth District

Bernadette Suarez, Mayor Pro Tem

Pat Kearney, City Councilmember