On City Streets, Fear and Hope as Mayor Pushes to Remove Mentally Ill

Mayor Eric Adams intends to remove people with severe, untreated mental illness from the streets. That will mean involuntary hospitalization of people deemed unable to care for themselves.

By Sarah Maslin Nir
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It was after dark in Washington Square Park in Manhattan, when Meeka Brown, 48, learned of Mayor Eric Adams’s new citywide push for authorities to remove people with severe, untreated mental illness from New York’s streets and subways — even against their will, and even if they are not a threat to others.

“I’m one,” said Ms. Brown, who said she is schizophrenic and also suffers from another psychotic disorder. “My mental state is being taken care of because it’s well-medicated; I try to keep it in control and don’t let it control me.” She was seated on a park bench on Tuesday night, a few hours after Mr. Adams’s announcement. As she spoke, a man passed by her in the dark, gesticulating wildly.

Ms. Brown was torn as she digested the mayor’s new policy. Officials in New York said it would require the involuntary hospitalization of people deemed too mentally ill to care for themselves.

Were she to spiral, Ms. Brown said she feared the city’s new marching orders could make her, a Black woman, a police target. “I’m scared that now I am going to be scared of that,” she said.

And yet, Ms. Brown credited the three times in the past that police took her off the street and involuntarily committed her to a psychiatric ward, for her current mental stability. “The stigma is that psych wards are bad,” she said. “They are not. They care.”

On and under the streets of the city on Tuesday night, men and women who face homelessness and mental illness digested the news with worry for themselves and their peers, and a measure of hope that a new approach would make the city, and their lives, safer.

Among those who cross their paths — the commuters, shopkeepers and other New Yorkers from more stable walks of life — the news was met with starkly mixed reviews. Some hoped it would help subway rides and late-night commutes feel safer. Others were disgusted at what they perceived as the city’s inhumane posture toward its most vulnerable.

Still others said that forcibly hospitalizing people who are battling their demons — what the mayor in his announcement called “a moral obligation” to help — does nothing to address why in a prosperous city so many suffer in its streets.

About 3,400 people were living in streets and subways in January, according to the city’s annual estimate, criticized by some as a vast undercount. Studies have shown that a large majority of unsheltered New Yorkers have mental illness or other severe health problems, and a series of random street attacks over the course of the pandemic has punctured the city’s sense of safety.
At Brisbee’s, a hot-dog stand in Times Square, Cole Fox, 32, said he and other staff have been assaulted by some of the mentally ill transient people who camp out nearby. “But it’s kind of a little worrisome to think about what that policy actually looks like,” Mr. Fox said. “I think whenever people get dragged off the streets, it’s kind of a problem — but then you’ve got people that are really concerned about crime and violence.”

Mr. Adams, in an emailed statement, described the plan as an effort to close cracks in the city’s social safety net and get people living with serious mental illness more help and treatment.

“As a city, we have a moral obligation to support our fellow New Yorkers and stop the decades-long practice of turning a blind eye towards those suffering from severe mental illness,” Mr. Adams said.

“It is not acceptable for us to see someone who clearly needs help and walk past them,” he added.

Earlier in November, Jumaane Williams, the city’s public advocate, released a report criticizing the mayor’s efforts to help New Yorkers with serious mental illness. Programs for them have shrunk, the public advocate said, and Mr. Adams has demonstrated an overreliance on police.

On Tuesday night, in a subway station in the Kingsbridge Heights section of the Bronx, Diane Borsey, 66, said she has been subjected to violence by other people like her who are unhoused, but also from police officers. Under the new policy, she feared officers would have “too much power.”

Eon Marques, 44, who said he lives on the street with his girlfriend, Ann Atori, 43, said he has had humiliating encounters with the police. He was resting his head in his girlfriend’s lap on the floor of the AirTrain station in Jamaica, Queens, on Tuesday night. “It makes me feel like I’m nothing, like I’m not human, like I’m a dog — something less than human.”

Mr. Adams’s new directive, he said, felt like even more of a violation. “It doesn’t matter if they have mental health issues,” Mr. Marques said. “They have the right to be free or say what they want to do.”

In Harlem, at Mary Jane’s Exotic Smoke Shop, two employees, Sean Moody, 25, and Shafiee Akhter, 20, said they regularly interact with homeless people. They were aghast at the new initiative. “We treat them like they’re regular human beings,” Mr. Akhter said, describing the new policy as “crazy.” “I personally don’t even want to see it happen.”

Behind the counter, Mr. Moody said he himself had experienced homelessness six times. “They’re making it legal to kidnap somebody,” he said. He was particularly distraught that the mayor’s plans did not appear to include a long-term solution for those caught in the police’s net.

“What happens to that human being? What happens to that person?” Mr. Moody said. “Did they get clean? Did they live a normal life? Did they get to get a home? Did you give them food? Did you actually put something in their belly?”

But others, like Michael McLurkin, 47, who goes by Quest, and has slept on the streets not far from the smoke shop the past two months, approved of the mayor’s plan as a much-needed initiative to tackle the dangerous situations he faces each night.
“It’s violent people out here,” Mr. McLurkin said as he stood outside the Harlem 125th Street station of the Metro-North Railroad. “If people need that kind of support, it would be creative.”

Outside of Pennsylvania Station, Stephen Gomes, 50, stood beside a shopping cart full of his belongings — an assortment of bags, a plastic cup from Starbucks, loose change and a pair of gloves. He agreed.

“All the stuff that’s been happening in our society, I think it’s pretty warranted,” he said of the new directive. “All the mental facilities seem to have been closed, and a lot of the mentally ill seem to be displaced within the homeless society. So what are you going to do? Send the police to take them in,” Mr. Gomes said.

As Omar Ahmed, 51, stood behind the counter at Exotic Convenience and Smoke Shop in Harlem, two people who appeared to be homeless, handed him piles of change to purchase cigarettes. “To see this city clean is better than it is right now,” he said. “It’s going to be maybe less crime.”

But Mr. Ahmed still had questions about the new policy: “Who’s going to decide who’s mentally ill and who’s not?” he asked.

In Washington Square Park, a group of people shared a bottle of brown liquor on a bench on Tuesday night. A few of them spoke aloud to themselves. One man rocked quietly.

“It is a double-edged sword, because yes, they need help, and it is hard for them to get help out here, but you don’t just because they seem crazy start putting them away,” said a truck driver who said he has a home, but spends his evenings with a community he described as “street” in the park.

In New York City, homelessness disproportionately affects Black people, according to the Coalition for the Homeless, an advocacy organization. The truck driver, who declined to share his name, said he was concerned that increased interaction with police could be deadly for the street’s mentally ill Black people.

“I thought they wanted to have some kind of advocacy to deal with mentally ill people,” he said. “I thought that is what they were supposed to be doing. You want to sic more police on mentally ill people?”

On 125th Street, outside the Metro-North station, Mr. McLurkin smoked a cigarette and thought about the new policy’s implications. Although he has had a past diagnosis of mental illness, he did not feel he was at risk.

“They may have power over others but they cannot take me away,” Mr. McLurkin said. “No one can take my spirit and joy and pride.”

Liset Cruz, Téa Kvetenadze, Sasha von Oldershausen and Brittany Kriegstein contributed reporting.

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