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The City of New York
Community Board 8 Manhattan
Women and Families Committee
Wednesday, May 29, 2024 - 6:30 PM
Conducted Remotely on Zoom

Minutes

Present: Elizabeth Ashby, Gayle Baron, Alida Camp, Susan Evans (Public Member), Sahar Husain, Rita Popper, Peggy Price, Robin Seligson, and Jack Sasson.

Approximate Number of Public Attendees: 32

Item 1: Women & Families Committee Meeting, in Conjunction with the Health, Seniors & Social Services Committee: Special Forum: Crime on the NYC Streets: How Women Can Protect Themselves.

The panelists included: Dr. Mangai Natarajan, a Professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Tsahi Shemesh, Founder and CEO of Krav Maga Experts, Meg Reiss, Chief Assistant DA in the Manhattan District Attorney's Office; and, Beverly Gilchrist, Chief of the Survivor Services Bureau in the Manhattan DA's Office.

With felony and misdemeanor assaults climbing on the Upper East Side, panelists detailed ways the public can protect themselves. In addition, officials with the Manhattan District Attorney's Office explained how they address the rising street crime problem. Although overall crime rates have fallen on the Upper East Side, street crime has been surging.

According to CompStat data, in the 28 days ending on May 26, 2024, felony assaults recorded in the 19th Police Precinct (Upper East Side area) jumped 46.7%, versus the same period last year, while misdemeanor assaults leapt a whopping 122.2% during the same period. For this year through May 26, felony assaults on the UES slid 5.3%, while misdemeanor assaults climbed 7.3%. In 2023, data show felony assaults on the Upper East Side rose 4%.

Of late, women have often (but not exclusively) been targets of what Dr. Natarajan called random "punching and slashing" on the streets. As she noted, "According to the media, 50 women have reported they were attacked in recent days, which is alarming and warrants attention." And the data may be incomplete, since many assaults go unreported, she and other speakers said.

Dr. Natarajan cited several types of protection individuals can employ: using devices, such as pepper spray, which anyone 18 or older can use legally with certain restrictions, and a whistle, avoiding drawing unwanted attention to oneself, placing credit cards, cash and a driver's license in a coat pocket to reduce losses from a robbery, and, when in public, remaining watchful of surroundings, staying in well-lighted areas and avoiding the use of headphones while on the street.

Tsahi Shemesh, Founder of Krav Maga Experts, which provides self-defense programs, has "seen an increase in crime post-Covid." To avoid street crime, he believes "everybody should know some form of self-defense," which builds confidence and lowers the fear of street crime. "It removes the target from your back because criminals are looking for easy prey." To reduce signs of fear, Mr. Shemesh recommends remaining discretely

aware of surroundings without acting nervously “hyper-alert.” He recommends observing the body language of people around you, and, when in a closed space, identifying the nearest exit.

If under attack, Mr. Shemesh strongly urged using one’s voice to get attention and help. In turn, he downplayed the merits of whistles, pepper spray—which users often carry in their purse, making it inaccessible in an attack—and sharp objects. In the latter case, “You have to be willing to use the objects to hurt someone. And if you do hurt someone, there will be implications,” he warned. To Mr. Shemesh, physical self-defense—such as punching—should be a last resort. And even then, it should be kept to the minimum needed. But if physical self-defense is necessary, he advised, “Always aim for the attacker’s nose, eyes, and groin, which will have a better effect than trying to hit other body parts.” A few months ago, he was forced into a physical altercation. As he was leaving his self-defense studio with his two young children, a nearby man who looked “perfectly normal” suddenly took an unprovoked swing at him. The shocked Mr. Shemesh punched back because “if I hadn’t done anything” about the attack, “I’d have gotten hit again. I did the minimum I had to do to make the attack stop.”

Meg Reiss, Chief Assistant District Attorney, noted that there were 75 felony assaults on the Upper East Side from January 1, 2023, to May 2, 2023. During the same period of 2024, assaults numbered 71, dropping 5.3%. Despite the drop, like our other speakers, Ms. Reiss said that the feeling of safety is more important than the numbers. There has been an increase in stranger assaults recently, and she urged victims to report crimes even if they appear to be low-level. The police are aware of known hot spots for crime but don’t know where unreported crimes take place. She urged victims to bring these altercations to the attention of the NYPD since this will assist in determining where police resources are allocated.

There are specific procedures that take place from an assailant’s arrest to an arraignment. Once there is an arrest, the accused is brought to the 19th Precinct’s complaint room. The room is staffed with DA’s, some of whom handle misdemeanors and others who handle felony assaults. If the crime is a misdemeanor, there will be a pre-arraignment and the accused may be placed in custodial arrest by the police or given a desk appearance ticket. If, however, there is a complaining witness, there will be a charge. The accused will then appear before a judge, the prosecutor, and an attorney to become aware of specifics.

In a felony assault, the DA’s office always requests bail. On the other hand, with a misdemeanor assault, NYS law prohibits a bail request. The only exception is if another case is pending. After arraignment for felony assaults, the accused will know the charges and the bail amount. Bail is required to ensure the accused returns to court. There may be circumstances when the assailant is released on his/her own recognizance. Post arraignment cases move through the system, with the misdemeanor cases handled differently. Once a complaint is made, an indictment is needed. Charges go to the Grand Jury, who makes the decision as to what happened. If there is adequate evidence, the case goes to trial. If guilty, a sentence is then rendered. If not guilty, the case is dismissed.

Beverly Gilchrist, Chief, Survivor Services Bureau, explained the services the DA’s office provides to help crime victims. The Bureau provides advocates and licensed mental health counselors to assist both crime victims and witnesses, enabling them to adjust to the traumatic event they experienced. Her unit examines the effect that trauma has on crime victims. Victims need to have a sense of safety restored. Not only are the victims impacted by the crime, but their families are impacted as well. The Bureau provides assistance to enable crime victims to manage life issues and restore a positive sense of moving forward. Mental health counselors provide initial support, but Ms. Gilchrist’s team helps the victims manage other life challenges as well. If necessary, the counselor will accompany victims to court and speak on their behalf. The team provides assistance such as help in applying for funds to pay medical bills, housing allocation, shelter placement, and securing public benefits.

The meeting ended at approximately 8:30 PM

P. Gayle Baron and Margaret Price, Co-Chairs, Women and Families Committee