

# Miami Herald

MIAMI BEACH

## Homeless residents at Miami Beach hostel urge city not to shut down 'a wonderful place'

By Aaron Leibowitz

March 05, 2025



Nicolas Guaqueta, a former Camillus House shelter resident who was transferred to the Bikini Hostel, speaks about how he got a job and housing during a press conference on Wednesday, March 5, 2025, outside of the hostel in Miami Beach, Florida. Several residents spoke about how their access to resources increased while staying at the hostel. Alie Skowronski [askowronski@miamiherald.com](mailto:askowronski@miamiherald.com)

In recent days, Miami Beach elected officials have painted a bleak picture of the situation at the Bikini Hostel, which has been providing beds to homeless individuals [since November](#).

One city commissioner called it “cruel and inhumane for the homeless population being warehoused there.” Another said it was “disgraceful” and that the people staying there had “no support services.” Several officials have raised concerns about crime.

But at a press conference Wednesday, six of the more than 100 homeless people staying at the hostel on West Avenue disputed the city's narrative, saying they have had a positive experience there and feel supported by caseworkers who are regularly on-site.

They urged the city not to heed [commissioners' demands that the hostel be shut down](#).

"This makes you feel like a human being," Michael Black, 60, said of his two months at the Bikini Hostel. "You feel like you're a part of the community."

Caseworkers from the city of Miami — which initially transferred individuals to the hostel from the Camillus House shelter following a dispute over bed prices — and from Hermanos de la Calle, a nonprofit that supports the homeless, have been working with the hostel's residents.

Nicolas Guaqueta, 48, said he feels he is one of the hostel's "success stories." After he was taken to the hostel from Camillus House in November, caseworkers helped him procure a bus pass and a job at a restaurant in Miami, he said.

Recently, Guaqueta said, Hermanos de la Calle helped him secure permanent housing at an apartment in Miami Beach. He will get the keys to the apartment on Friday.

"At the end of the day, it actually ended up benefiting me," he said.

The press conference was organized by the [Miami Coalition to Advance Racial Equity](#) (MCARE), a nonprofit that advocates for the homeless.



Lorenzo Galdeano listens from a balcony at the Bikini Hostel during a press conference on Wednesday, March 5, 2025, in Miami Beach, Florida. Alie Skowronski [askowronski@miamiherald.com](mailto:askowronski@miamiherald.com)

## A visit from inspectors

On Tuesday, Miami Beach fire inspectors visited [Jungle Vibes](#), a restaurant adjacent to the hostel that is under shared ownership, and ordered the restaurant to stop using its stovetop, citing an “inadequate” hood system. Inspectors had first flagged that violation and several others in August but said they visited the site again in September and were told by a hostel employee that the restaurant had been permanently closed.

Fire inspectors “learned this week that the restaurant was back in operation,” city spokesperson Melissa Berthier told the Miami Herald. Berthier said the restaurant’s bar can remain open and “food items that do not use this stovetop can continue to be served.”

Inspectors were back at the property Wednesday morning for a meeting with the restaurant’s managers to discuss the violations.

Phillip Muskat, who owns the hostel, said he believes the restaurant is a victim of “selective enforcement” by the city, less than one week after commissioners called for the hostel’s closure.

The inspection, he said, may be a pressure tactic to get him to sell the property to developer Michael Stern, who has been looking to buy it, or to work with the city on a plan to transfer the homeless individuals out of the hostel. Last week, Miami Beach Mayor Steven Meiner offered to pay the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust \$100,000 to have the homeless individuals relocated to the city of Miami, a proposal that was rejected by Homeless Trust Chairman Ron Book.

x

“It’s important [to the city] now because they want to shut it down,” Muskat said of the alleged violation. “This is their way of putting pressure on us to sign a deal.”

## **‘Don’t kick us while we’re down’**

Several residents said they want to stay at the Bikini Hostel while looking for permanent housing and that the arrangement is similar or preferable to staying at a shelter — and far better than sleeping on the street.

Jurij Gasparini, 38, said he had been staying at a Salvation Army shelter in Miami for about three months until he was told he failed a drug test and was ordered to leave. Three weeks ago, he said, police in Miami found him sleeping on a sidewalk and offered him a bed at the hostel in South Beach.

Since he arrived, he said, caseworkers have helped him procure food stamps. Conditions at the Bikini Hostel are “peaceful,” Gasparini added, saying he noticed less drug activity there than at several shelters in Miami.

“I don’t understand why they’re so aggressive with this place,” he said. “It’s a wonderful place.”

Another hostel resident, Angela Lovingood, said she had been on and off the streets for three years after she survived a fire that took the life of her daughter. Lovingood had been unable to find a shelter bed for about a year, “until this place right here opened their doors,” she said.

“This place has offered me something,” Lovingood said. “I hope you all decide not to close it. Don’t kick us while we’re down. Help us get up, help us be a contrib

Jacoby Rodriguez said she moved from New Jersey to Florida in September and that, while living on the streets in Overtown, she was robbed and left without her birth certificate and other essential documents. After struggling to find a shelter bed, she said she was placed at the Bikini Hostel in January. A case manager helped her get health insurance.

“Without this place, I would still be in the street with absolutely nothing,” she said.

## **‘A hostile public nuisance’**

Book, the Homeless Trust chairman who has clashed with Miami Beach officials, has touted a model of placing some homeless individuals in hotels and motels rather than traditional shelters. The Bikini Hostel, which has 150 beds, is still accepting other guests and is “operating within its permitted use,” Miami Beach City Attorney Ricardo Dopico told commissioners last week.

But Miami Beach leaders say it’s not a long-term solution and have threatened to take the matter to court if they are unable to find an alternative placement for the homeless residents. The city does not have any homeless shelters but provides outreach services and pays to reserve dozens of shelter beds in the city



of Miami.

Amid a [crackdown on outdoor sleeping](#) by Miami Beach police, the city's unsheltered homeless population was 105 in an overnight count by the Homeless Trust in January, a 31% decrease from a year earlier.

In an email to residents last week, Commissioner Kristen Rosen Gonzalez called the Bikini Hostel situation "a clear and present public safety hazard — a hostile public nuisance that endangers both the homeless individuals inside and the surrounding community."

The individuals staying at the hostel, she said, have "no oversight, no access to proper meals, no medical or rehabilitation services, and no protected common area."

Rosen Gonzalez added that residents in several neighborhoods within one or two miles of the hostel, including the Bayshore area and the Venetian Islands, have recently reported an increase in car thefts and home burglaries, though she did not provide evidence that any of the crimes had been committed by people staying at the hostel.

"It is not unreasonable to ask: Are these 105 unsupervised individuals committing crimes out of sheer desperation?" she wrote. "The situation is beyond unacceptable — it is dangerous."

David Peery, the executive director of MCARE and a plaintiff in [the landmark Pottinger case](#) on homelessness in Miami, said at Wednesday's press conference that if there were issues with crime, a police officer stationed outside the hostel at all hours should have flagged them. Miami Beach is paying \$35,000 per month for the police detail.

"Wouldn't they be doing something about that?" Peery said.

Rosen Gonzalez and other city officials calling for the hostel's operating license to be revoked are responding, in part, to residents in the West Avenue neighborhood who have lodged numerous complaints.

In a Facebook group for the local neighborhood association, residents have mented the hostel's use as a de facto homeless shelter. We are working our butts off to afford to live here," one resident wrote, "and they are just chilling and shooting the breeze."

This story was originally published March 5, 2025 at 4:50 PM.

*Aaron Leibowitz covers the city of Miami Beach for the Miami Herald, where he has worked as a local government reporter since 2019. He was part of a team that won a 2022 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the collapse of the Champlain Towers South condo building in Surfside. He is a graduate of Columbia Journalism School's Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism.*