

Emails from community members (posted with permission)

1. Email from Lee Kumutat, LightHouse Director of Communications

I am writing to inform you of our significant concerns about open air drug dealing in the Mid-Market neighborhood. LightHouse for the Blind owns 1155 Market St. where our community based services are headquartered and we also lease a large portion of our building to the City and County of San Francisco. With a great deal of foot traffic to and from BART from our building the drug dealing atmosphere causes significant safety concerns for the blind community who must walk through a gauntlet just to enter our building. Our staff and clients work in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation from the drug dealers around our building that is disturbing that many staff will not leave the building even for lunch once they arrive for the day. The dealers will block accessible access to BART stairs and the sidewalk. We have had multiple blind community and staff who have fallen down the stairs by tripping over users who are being protected by dealers. The blind person is helpless to identify who pushed them or tripped them because they cannot see them. Because of all of this we have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for off duty police officers and now work with Urban Alchemy at the same cost annually. There is a hidden tax on businesses and community providers who operate on mid-market called the protect yourself tax because the city is not enforcing the law in our neighborhood. This must be addressed by the DA who is the only one who can actually file charges against drug dealers who have crated a magnet for use in our neighborhood.

2. Email from Kristen and Raul Villalobos, Tenderloin Residents

I heard you were looking for letters from tenants and business owners living in the TL, and my husband and I wanted to offer our perspective. We have lived on the corner of Golden Gate and Larkin for many years: 20 for my husband, and almost 13 for me. Over those years, we've watched the quality of life on this block deteriorate dramatically. The real decline began about 3 years ago then nosedived when the pandemic began. Prior to that, though this corner was "in the TL" and more lively than say, Hayes Valley, it wasn't bad. It was fine. We could laugh about the occasional crazy thing we saw or heard outside. We were happy to stay here forever in a rent controlled building full of neighbors we know and care about. I always felt safe walking around alone- always.

We live on the second floor with 100 year old windows, so it often sounds like what is happening on the street is happening inside our home. We feel trapped by sound: there is no escaping the constant sirens, the screaming of people in crisis, the smashing of bottles (why??), the dealers whooping to each other (it must be some sort of signaling, because it's bizarre) and the constant, never ending, incredibly loud music. Sometimes the music is only there for a few minutes as the car blaring it or the person with a blue tooth speaker stops to buy drugs, but other times the music will go on for hours while people party. In the daytime, in the evening, in the middle of the night: the music is a constant. It may seem like a small thing, but very often the music being played is violent and misogynistic, which makes it that much more intrusive and upsetting. For a woman to be subjected to the constant sound of "bitch" inside her own home is.....not cool. It feels like we can't escape the negative- the suffering- the misery, the constant reminder that bad things are happening outside and no one seems to give a damn about it. I've been working from home for a year now, and sometimes have to run to our closet in an attempt to keep whoever I'm speaking with from hearing either the profanity being screamed, or the incredibly loud music going by.

The 19 bus shelter on Larkin provides a great cover for the dealers to stand behind, and a great spot for drug fueled parties. They can last all night (even when we call the police), sometimes ending in an overdose. We hear it all, as the bus shelter is directly underneath our bedroom window. A few mornings ago, we were woken to the sound of medics bringing someone back from an overdose. Sometimes we'll see two overdoses in the same spot on the same day. Last October, a dealer was shot and killed under our bedroom window. When I've brought up removing the shelter in various town halls, I've been told that it won't happen- the company who bought advertising has a contract, yada yada. No one can use the shelter for its intended use, since it's always full of people using. I know shelters have been removed in the past for these reasons (in 2014 on Eddy, I believe), and the shelter on Larkin has absolutely become a public danger/nuisance. It needs to go.

Most any day, at any moment, I can look out my window and see someone holding a little piece of foil. If we walk outside our front gate and the sidewalk isn't full of dealers, users, feces or garbage, we're very pleasantly surprised- the expectation is always that we're going to have to dart through something potentially dangerous, including a cloud of meth/fentanyl(?) smoke. When we come home, we're strategic about where we'll cross the street and which path we'll take to enter our building as safely as we can, avoiding the people congregated in front of it. Sometimes people are using directly in front of the gate and we have to ask them to move to get in. Sometimes they react in a hostile manner, which is always really scary.

We've had a huge increase in people coming into our building and stealing mail. Many times, they've tried to rip the mailboxes off the wall and have almost succeeded. We have a group chat with neighbors now, so we can warn each other when packages are in, but it's still really stressful when we're expecting something. The last few weeks, we've had a woman come in and pull the fire alarm a few times, wasting SFFD's time.

I haven't left the building by myself after dark in years. My husband doesn't want me out there, and I don't want to be out there without him. Since the pandemic, neither of us leave after dark. Neither of us will take the garbage out after dark because of all the drug activity in Dodge Alley- it just doesn't feel safe. We want to get a dog, but have refrained because all the walking would fall on my husband at night, which isn't fair. This may be a small, somewhat privileged complaint, but it has affected our quality of life.

The state of things has led to tension in our relationship, as my husband has reached the end of his patience and wants to move, but I'm not there yet. I'm on the board of the TLCBD as a resident member, and if we leave I'll have to give up my seat. I hate the idea of giving up and letting the dealers win. I want to stay and fight on behalf of our neighbors who can't afford to move like we can. Almost every neighbor in that position that I'm thinking of has children. I grew up poor and my family moved almost yearly, something that continued into my young adult years. The 13 years I've spent in this building has been the most stable period of my entire life, and I'm tearing up as I type this, thinking of leaving my community behind. I am continually inspired by the people I see fighting to make this neighborhood better, and then I'm furious when I think about how hard we have to fight for what almost every other neighborhood in this city gets to enjoy: cleanliness, peace, the presence of 'law and order'.

Living in the Tenderloin means trying to tamp down my own empathy, because there's too much suffering to bear. The suffering I see on the street has me crying regularly. I don't understand why our society allows people to fall through the cracks this way. I don't understand why we aren't doing

EVERYTHING to help people overcome their addiction issues. While I definitely think the police need to step up their game to get (and keep) these dealers off the street, I know that there's no way to arrest our way out of this problem. We MUST stop the demand, which means we MUST help people get better.

Every person who OD's should be offered a bed in a treatment program. There should be multiple teams of people going out every day offering treatment- no conditions, no hoops, just genuine help. I know that not every user is going to take help the first time it's offered, but we have to keep trying until they do. I don't understand why I don't hear more of this when there are conversations about drug dealing. It seems so obvious to me. Supply-demand: it's a real thing. I'm cautiously optimistic that the Mental Health SF program will really ramp up this effort in a way that makes a difference.

I also very strongly believe that we need to change how the law treats the sale of fentanyl. It is unlike any other drug out there, and I don't have to tell you that it's killing people. Anyone selling it should be charged with attempted manslaughter, because that's essentially what they're doing. I understand that that is something that probably needs to be addressed at the state level, but if there is anything we could do on the local level to keep anyone dealing it from being released, we should do it. To be clear, the hammer should come down on the dealers. Users should be treated with compassion and offered treatment.

Thank you for the work you've done to tackle these issues, and for asking for and being open to community perspectives. This was an email about the bad parts of our neighborhood, but I could write a longer one talking about the good! The Tenderloin is a beautiful community, and we deserve safety. Please help us get back to where we were before! (as I close this email, there is a woman screaming outside, clearly in crisis. She's the fourth person I've heard screaming since I began typing)

3. Email from Catherine and Dimitrios Kalessis

My husband and I are the owners of The Argentum Project located at 47 6th street.

<https://www.yelp.com/biz/the-argentum-project-san-francisco?osq=the+argentum+project>

We built and opened a beautiful cafe which was often called a bright spot on 6th street. While supporting the business and residents in the area, we also showed kindness and compassion to the homeless and even drug dealers who stood in front and around our business daily. My theory was to take any steps necessary to protect my family, our staff, and our business.

How did this affect us?

A well-known drug dealer, Xavier, stood with his buddies only feet from our door smoking pot, selling drugs, and blaring music. Over time he threatened our business, my husband, and our employees. He attacked someone in front of our cafe and pushed them into my employee's car but she was too afraid to report it and had over \$2000 in-car damage to pay herself. This is only one specific example of the many personal and property threats we endured from him and his buddies.

I was followed and threatened by a drug dealer on a bicycle as I drove down Stevenson from 7th -6th. I was in my car and he on his bike rode in front of me, up to my window and over to 6th, and Jesse continuing his baseless threats. It was terrifying!! I have also had to call the police to assist me in removing drug addicts with visible drugs and syringes from my cafe. We even had a drug addict completely change her clothes inside our restaurant and there was nothing I could do!

My husband and I have twins who from the age of 9-13 have been witness to far too much drug use, sales, craziness, and violence in front of our cafe. As working parents, we couldn't leave them at home yet they were too scared to ever go with us even if they just had to wait in the car for a few minutes. They would run into the restaurant and hide in fear for themselves and fear for our safety every day. It is so wrong and painful to have to subject our children to this kind of psychological assault and concern!

The overall effect of the drug dealers prevented many friends and associates from supporting our business out of fear and filth in the neighborhood. I cannot tell you how many times we were told how much more successful we would be if only we were in a different neighborhood.

We chose this location on the basis of rebuilding and supporting the neighborhood with freshly made food served with a true passion. We truly want to be part of the rebirth of what was once a beautiful, vibrant and safe neighborhood. We were very grateful for all the kindness and support we received from the Tenderloin police department. They are an absolutely terrific group of officers and it was our great pleasure to meet them. We were also very grateful for the MMCBD. They too were always kind, helpful, and responsive.

In October of 2020, there was a fire between the SRO hotel lobby and our cafe which caused tremendous damage to the structure of the building and it continues to be under repair. For this reason, we have had to clear out our restaurant and are unsure when we can rebuild. If the area does not improve, we will not rebuild in the mid-market area due to the state of the drugs, appearance, and overall safety of the area.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share some glimpses of our experience.