

# Budget Cuts Hit a Brooklyn Area Over and Over

By **DAVID W. CHEN**

Christina Nieves's life revolves around a handful of blocks in Brooklyn: Drop off her 4-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son at the Strong Place day care center. Make sure her 75-year-old grandmother, who uses a wheelchair, makes it to lunch at the Gowanus Senior Center. Then, on too many occasions to count, take her son, who is asthmatic and prone to seizures, to the Wyckoff children's clinic.

And with warm days now here, watch her children frolic at the Douglass and DeGraw pool.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg plans to close all four places.

"My doctor, my school, my grandmother's senior center — wow, what else is left?" said Ms. Nieves, 25, who sometimes volunteers at the day care center. "I understand one thing — but come on, all these things happening at the same time? This is crazy. Crazy."

When Mr. Bloomberg unveiled his budget a few weeks ago, he warned that no neighborhood would be spared in his struggle to plug a \$5 billion gap. But in making steep across-the-board cuts to dozens of agencies and programs, it was almost inevitable that they would fall heaviest on some neighborhoods.

And if there is one place that for sheer density and variety of affected services is the epicenter of budget pain, it is a tiny slice of Brooklyn covering six blocks by eight blocks, straddling Gowanus, Carroll Gardens and Boerum Hill, according to an analysis by The New York Times of the location of the facilities already singled out for closing.

Within a 10-minute walk, three day care centers, one senior center, one swimming pool, one after-school program and a health clinic are to close. Venture 20 minutes more, and six additional facilities — two day care centers, two after-school programs, a senior center and a health clinic — are also to shut down on July 1, the start of the new fiscal year. Making matters worse, the nearest public transit option — the B37 bus along Third Avenue — is being eliminated by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

How dire the final picture ends up being is murky, because the City Council must weigh in on the mayor's proposal, and a new state budget that could yield more money for New York is nowhere in sight. But with the city and the state in their worst financial shape in decades, the Bloomberg administration says there may be no way to avoid carrying out its menu of cuts.

“Budget choices are made in each area through this lens: how can we reduce spending while having the smallest impact on the most essential services, and impact the fewest number of New Yorkers, particularly the fewest number of vulnerable New Yorkers,” said Marc La Vorgna, a spokesman for Mr. Bloomberg.

Advocates for programs whose survival is threatened acknowledge the city's dilemma, but they argue that the Bloomberg administration failed to truly appreciate how cutting a potpourri of programs might damage individual neighborhoods.

“I worry that the various agencies are making their decisions in a vacuum, and I worry that there could be a domino effect for families,” said Allison Sesso, deputy executive director of the Human Services Council of New York City, an umbrella group of nonprofit social service agencies. “People get used to these services being in their community, and these services have connections to other services in their community, and once they disappear, people don't know where to be referred to.”

But city officials defended their decisions, arguing that the lingering economic downturn coupled with the budget stalemate in Albany left them no option. They said they tried to spread the pain as evenly as possible while taking into account changes in the neighborhood, like gentrification, that may affect local needs.

Still, even more alarming to advocates is that the city has yet to identify the dozens of libraries and the fire companies it plans to close. Beyond ending programs wholesale, the city is also

considering steep cuts to adult literacy programs, child welfare services and the corps of school nurses.

In Brooklyn, the streets around Gowanus bustle with chic restaurants like the Black Mountain Winehouse and handsome brownstones with immaculate gardens. But the area also features two large public housing complexes, rising numbers of food stamp recipients and five public schools that provide free or reduced-cost lunches to most of their students.

The Gowanus Senior Center, one of 50 scheduled to close, serves 30 meals a day in a room painted bright yellow and orange, its walls adorned with masks made by the people who use it. The clients — 60 percent of them Latino, and 40 percent African-American — are fiercely loyal, and are worried about relocating to the next-closest center, a walk of 20 to 25 minutes even for the most able-bodied.

Carmen Zayas, 58, a nurse's aide who is retired, spends several hours a day at the center and helped paint the room and hang the flags of a dozen countries from Latin America and the Caribbean on the wall. "This is a happy place because we're like family here, so if Bloomberg shuts us down, it would be like me losing a child," she said.

Ms. Nieves's grandmother, Rose Garcia, is another regular. "She's been going there ever since my grandfather died," Ms. Nieves said. "It's like she gets her mind occupied.

"But what's she going to do now? It's not like these streets are O.K. all the time," Ms. Nieves said, noting the fatal shooting in May of a 16-year-old girl a couple of blocks away.

Visiting the center, on Baltic Street, Councilman Stephen Levin, who represents the neighborhood, said, "When I saw this center on the list, it broke my heart."

Around the corner, the Bethel Baptist and Strong Place day care centers on Hoyt Street are 2 of 16 around the city that are closing. Housed in the same building, they serve 95 children, ages 2 to 5, from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents, many of whom are single mothers, rave about the academic preparation (the children are currently studying Langston Hughes) and artistic inspiration (Miró and Pollock are in vogue), and alumni have gone on to colleges like Barnard and the University of Pennsylvania.

But city officials say that the annual rent of \$624,000 is too high and that the increasingly

upscale neighborhood no longer needs as many slots for children from low-income families. Families pay a minimum of \$5 a week, based on a sliding scale of income.

But Joan Morris, director of the Bethel Baptist day care center, said city officials misunderstood the neighborhood's dynamics. "We have families in shelters, homeless," she said. "For the city to snatch things without — I don't know, due process? — is a callous disregard for families."

Stephanie Barry was so impressed by the academic program and fresh meals at Strong Place that she kept her 3-year-old daughter, Zya, home until a slot opened up in January.

"It's been great," said Ms. Barry, 36. "She's around other kids, socializing; she's doing great art projects; she's learning so much." About four blocks away, an after-school program at New Horizons Middle School 442, run by **Good Shepherd Services**, is closing, as well.

Carline Clerge, a social worker employed by the city's Human Resources Administration, credits the program with giving her son, Sharod, 14, structure and nurturing, with sports, drama, financial literacy and other programs. Never was that support more vital, she said, than in 2008, when her daughter, Sashanna, spent the last months of her life hospitalized with bone cancer.

As Sharod chooses a high school next year, one factor, Ms. Clerge said, is proximity to the middle school, because he wants to be a counselor in the after-school program. Ms. Clerge worries about what he might do if it closes, and where he might go once classes end.

"My heart will not be still," she said. "Maybe he can go to the library. If the library is still open."