

Barrios-Paoli Departure A Key Loss for Mayor

By RICHARD STEIER | Posted: Friday, September 4, 2015 4:45 pm

Homeless advocates and veterans of city government last week lamented the pending departure of Lilliam Barrios-Paoli as Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services in what was viewed as symptomatic of a clash over either priorities or turf with other top administration officials.

Ms. Barrios-Paoli, who has served in top social-service positions under four of the last five Mayors and is highly regarded for both her governmental skills and her compassion, will step down at the end of the month from her \$220,000-a-year job to become the unsalaried Chairman of the Board of the Health and Hospitals Corporation.

Product of Frustration?

She and the Mayor issued a joint statement of mutual praise, in which he cited her role in “the development of rental-assistance programs for the homeless, an unprecedented training institute for child-welfare workers, an ambitious plan to expand community health care,” and her assistance in the expansion of the city’s after-school program.

Others said, however, that they believed Ms. Barrios-Paoli had grown frustrated in the job, either because of the Mayor’s sometimes-dogmatic approach to government or because of a structural problem that placed her in conflict in her efforts to reduce homelessness with Alicia Glen, the Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development.

The loss of Ms. Barrios-Paoli is a blow to the Mayor not only because of her abilities but in light of his getting heat recently from Latino advocates over not enough Hispanics occupying key city jobs. While Carmen Fariña as Schools Chancellor holds a more high-profile position, Ms. Barrios-Paoli is the administration’s top-ranking Latina.

One irony of the early split is that the Mayor’s views on social services are more in sync with hers than any of the three predecessors whom she served: Ed Koch, Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg. Ms.



Barrios-Paoli

LILLIAM BARRIOS-PAOLI: A victim of conflicting agendas?

Barrios-Paoli, a former nun, once said Mr. Koch was a pleasure to work for because despite their political differences he respected her enough to let her do her job in positions that included a Deputy Mayor's post. She was most at odds with Mr. Giuliani—Mr. de Blasio's polar opposite on homeless issues—but former top aides of his praised her selection two years ago.

Shortly after the current Mayor gave her the job, she told a New York Times reporter, "For the first time in my life, I'm going to be working for somebody who really, truly embraces the things that I do."

'A Little Bit Chaotic'

One former colleague said last week, "I just think that she was frustrated in getting things done. I think there was a feeling that City Hall didn't work as a team. She's 69 years old; she's been in every administration. This is one that's a little bit chaotic."

Mary Brosnahan, the longtime head of the Coalition for the Homeless, said Sept. 3, "I can't say enough good things about her." She explained that in addition to the depth and breadth of Ms. Barrios-Paoli's knowledge of homeless issues, "She can quickly pull into focus a more-granular perspective."

She recalled two lengthy conversations she had with Ms. Barrios-Paoli, one at the tail end of the Bloomberg administration, which she served as Commissioner of the Department for the Aging, and one a couple of months into the de Blasio administration.

During the first one, Ms. Brosnahan recalled, Ms. Barrios-Paoli "wanted to hear everything from soup to nuts about how things had gotten so off track" in serving the city's homeless population.

An Instant Understanding

The other meeting took place on a snowy day best remembered for the Mayor and Ms. Fariña deciding not to close the public schools because the accumulation was not large, although the roads were icy. Ms. Brosnahan and Ms. Barrios-Paoli were together with Steven Banks, the longtime Legal Aid official who had not yet been named Mr. de Blasio's Commissioner for Homeless Services, and they were talking about the potential cutoff from public assistance of those who because of the weather would find it difficult that day to keep appointments with their city Caseworkers.

Ms. Brosnahan and Mr. Banks both made the point that clemency should be granted to those who missed appointments in that kind of weather. What impressed her, she said, was less that Ms. Barrios-Paoli agreed with them than that she immediately moved to correct the problem.

"It was to me, again, the broad vision, but she immediately took action and literally helped thousands of people keep food on the table and shelter over their heads," Ms. Brosnahan said.