

The National Guard & The D.C. Armory: An Important Call for Leadership To Serve Those Who Serve

Written by: Andrew J. Shirley, January 2014

Looking like many non-descript government buildings constructed throughout the Washington, D.C. area, the District of Columbia Armory sits on the edge of town just a few hundred yards from RFK Stadium.

Officially residing at 2001 East Capitol Street, the 71 year-old facility shows its age and behind bent fences and old windows hides its versatility and usefulness to the community and the nation. For most military installations, “covert” and “concealed” are two objectives commonly par for the course. However, this facility is a bit different. Its massive space houses the Washington D.C. National Guard, serves as a 67,000 square foot military training facility, and accommodates the needs of visiting Guardsmen from across the United States.

This is not without logical reason. With 10,000 seats inside and 10,000 parking spots outside, the decaying yet structurally jaw dropping facility is one of the few locations in Washington with the capacity to handle major events in either a time of crisis or a time of celebration. Located on the same block as the Stadium-Armory Metro and conveniently accessible from all directions via car, the facility is a hidden gem in Washington.

By way of background, the facility was once the home of multiple Presidential inaugural ceremonies and countless military exercises. Although President Obama did celebrate his '08 inauguration at the D.C. Armory, the facility has largely become a recreational center for punt, pass & kick competitions, the D.C. Rollergirls, Halloween parties and the circus. However, in dire emergencies, the facility can be and has been utilized to aid the homeless and the displaced. In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana, more than 300 evacuees were housed in the Armory. At one point in the 1980s, a proposal was offered by the Washington D.C. City Council to reinvent the facility as a homeless shelter space.

Sadly, the space which was once used to host President Kennedy, his wife Jackie and seven of their nieces and nephews, has become a go-to event space with seemingly no go-to management or oversight.

Currently, while some rental revenue is evident, reinvestment is not. The toilets and bathrooms are filthy, the lighting system contains bulbs no longer legal under EPA regulations, and abundant holes in the ceiling make the massive arching structure look like the biggest pegboard the world has ever seen. Recently, more than 60 enlisted members of the military passed out during a full dress ceremony because the building to this day has no air-conditioning system.

As the home of the D.C. National Guard, and located in the heart of the city, the Armory will always be considered a likely go-to asset in the event in a major outbreak, military attack or other catastrophic event. Time and again, what is occurring globally is being observed and addressed via resources and manpower in Washington, D.C.

On 9/11, commanding from Air Force One, President George W. Bush demanded to return to Washington, D.C. despite the uncertain lingering danger that was unfolding at the Pentagon. With dozens of defense, security and military operations headquartered throughout region, the D.C. Armory sits in close proximity to essentially every key installation created to handle the aftereffects of a major event.

All this being said, in a world where “modern-efficiency”, “cross-promotion” and “multi-functional” are descriptive terms commonly thrown about in a number of settings to demonstrate value, the initial fact remains the same. The building was built for and designed to serve the military. The facility is still owned by the federal government and can not and should not be relieved from its intended and primary purpose.

In an effort to ensure full preparedness in the event of a major disaster as well as for the benefit of military service members, the time has come to give the Armory its full and due attention. For more than 70 years the Armory has been looking out for military, political and community needs of the Capital City not to mention the demands of the military and short term needs of the tragically displaced. Who exactly is looking out for the Armory? ■