

TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA CHAIR & CEO GREGORY RUSS
TENANT SAFETY AND BUILDING SANITATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING WITH THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND BUILDINGS
MONDAY, JUNE 29, 2020 – 1:00 PM
REMOTE HEARING (VIRTUAL ROOM 1)

Chairs Alicka Ampy-Samuel and Robert Cornegy Jr., members of the Committees on Public Housing and Housing and Buildings, other distinguished members of the City Council, NYCHA residents, and members of the public: good afternoon. I am Greg Russ, NYCHA's Chair and CEO. I am pleased to be joined virtually by General Manager & Chief Operating Officer Vito Mustaciuolo, Chief Compliance Officer Daniel Greene, and Executive Vice President for Community Engagement and Partnerships Sideya Sherman. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss NYCHA's efforts to ensure the health and safety of our residents and employees amidst this global pandemic, which remains our top priority.

First, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge all of our incredibly hardworking staff who are serving residents during this crisis – from the teams fixing boilers and elevators; to the caretakers keeping our buildings clean; to the staff behind the scenes who are reaching out to residents, procuring and distributing essential supplies and materials, and processing rent reductions. I'd also like to thank our resident leaders and community-based partners who are helping to distribute food and face coverings to those in need.

This is truly a challenging time in our history, and we are all engaged in the critically important work of taking care of our community. The coronavirus has affected all of us; it has significantly impacted our way of life and brought into sharp relief issues and inequities across the globe, including those related to health, economics, and connectivity. As a nation, as a city, and here at NYCHA, we have been presented an extraordinary challenge that we must overcome together.

Communicating with Our Stakeholders

The COVID-19 crisis underscores the importance of timely and accurate communication. At the outset, our first priority was to make sure that residents understood what we were up against and how they could take steps to protect themselves. So we began communicating early, even before we fully realized the devastating impacts of the coronavirus.

Since day one, we have been working nonstop to amplify the guidance from partners like the City of New York and the City's Health Department, to inform our residents and employees of the best health and safety practices to follow during the pandemic. As of June 25, we have delivered approximately 2.35 million COVID-19-related communications via phone calls, robocalls, and emails to residents and resident leaders, Section 8 residents, employees, elected officials, and advocates. To our social media reach of approximately 27 million, we posted about COVID-19 around 800 times between March 1, 2020, and June 25 on all our social media channels. We dedicated a page on our website to COVID-19 resources, and we've also posted important information and updates on *The NYCHA Journal*, our digital newspaper for residents. The COVID-19 safety posters we put up at all of our more than 2,200 buildings provide information in five languages, and other informational notices we distributed are available in 13 languages.

The hardworking staff from our Community Engagement and Partnerships department have made over 100,000 "wellness check" phone calls, resulting in nearly 60,000 personal conversations with our most vulnerable residents, including seniors, to make sure that they understand how they can stay safe, determine whether they have any special needs at this time, and connect them to resources from our partners. We recently partnered with the New York Cares volunteer organization to provide seniors a "buddy" who will make routine calls to those requesting ongoing checks by phone.

We are sending a newsletter to more than 230 resident association leaders three to five days a week to keep them informed about COVID-19, our efforts, and key NYCHA and City resources. We speak with the Chair of the Citywide Council of Presidents almost daily by phone, and with other resident leaders about two to three times per week,

representing over 9,500 calls since the start of the pandemic. We also hosted four Resident Advisory Board meetings and a Resident Leader Town Hall with senior NYCHA and City leadership to discuss COVID-19.

And we are providing elected officials with regular updates. NYCHA's Intergovernmental Relations team has held 219 external meetings to date to brief elected officials, their staff, and other community partners on the Authority's COVID-19 response and needs, and to respond to inquiries in real time. We have also co-hosted 11 tele-town hall events to provide updates and guidance to thousands of participants. And we are conducting informational webinars for advocates and addressing industry groups at their forums.

We will continue to keep all our stakeholders, including residents, informed as the guidance from experts like the CDC and NYC Health Department evolves.

Taking Action Early

NYCHA began taking precautions and proactive measures to protect our residents back in February, before there was even a confirmed case of COVID-19 in New York. We hired vendors and developed schedules to sanitize buildings – we started disinfecting senior buildings on March 11 and family buildings on March 13. We are sanitizing senior buildings five times a week and sanitizing family buildings three times per week. The focus is on high-touch, high-traffic areas, such as lobby and common area doors; mailboxes; stairway doors, handles, and handrails; elevators panels; trash chute doors; and other common areas.

The disinfectants the vendors use to sanitize the buildings are on the EPA's official list of disinfectants for use against COVID-19. And staff from our Compliance, Quality Assurance (QA), and Environmental Health and Safety departments are working tirelessly in the field and via remote monitoring to make sure that the required protocols are being followed throughout the sanitization process. They have conducted over 4,100 on-site field inspections at nearly 300 developments and conducted more than 4,700

remote surveys of senior development staff, with results reported daily and deficiencies addressed promptly. Resident complaints, which can be submitted through our website or by calling the Customer Contact Center (CCC), are investigated through on-site inspections or direct inquiries to the vendor.

We have made about 180 Section 3 hires as part of the building disinfection work and AC installation I'll discuss later in the testimony, including about 150 NYCHA residents.

To supplement the caretaker staff at our developments – who clean lobbies and common areas, remove waste, and maintain the grounds every day – we hired over 1,000 per diem workers, more than half of whom are residents.

Additionally, we provided face coverings to all employees who work at our developments and to employees who may come into contact with others during the course of their workday. As the guidance from the CDC and Health Department, and government directives, became more stringent during the course of the pandemic, we adapted our policies on face coverings for staff accordingly.

Helping to Alleviate Residents' Financial Burden

We are constantly looking for ways to alleviate the financial burden for households that may be impacted by additional expenses or a loss of income during these difficult and uncertain times. At the very beginning of the crisis, NYCHA suspended resident evictions for as long as the City is under a state of emergency, to help keep our families healthy and housed. In addition, we closed our hearing offices and adjourned all cases before the Housing Court.

We also simplified our Rent Hardship Policy to make it easier for residents to apply. In only a few weeks, we amended a process that was admittedly burdensome for residents to benefit from. Now, with just a few clicks on a computer or by answering a few questions with a CCC rep, residents can request a rent adjustment due to a partial or full loss of income. There is no waiting period to apply, and resident can self-certify their

loss of income. NYCHA rent is always 30 percent of income, so if household income is zero, then the rent is zero. We have received over 15,000 rent hardship requests since March 12.

Connecting Residents to Services and Resources

We are working with City agencies and community partners to connect residents to food, medication, and essential health and social services during this crisis. For instance, NYCHA and the City are working to enroll all eligible residents in GetFoodNYC. We have also instituted bulk food delivery at many of our senior buildings and have hired residents to assist with the delivery process. To date, more than 5 million meals have been delivered to over 80,000 NYCHA households since mid-April. NYCHA has also worked with a variety of partners – including Food Bank for New York City, CLOTH, City Harvest, and others – to help organize pop-up food distribution events and other targeted meal delivery programs. And we are promoting the opportunity for free grab-and-go meals at 400 schools citywide. We would like to thank all of our partners, including members of the Council, for your assistance with these vital efforts.

To help our seniors stay cool and safe at home this summer, Mayor de Blasio committed more than \$6 million and NYCHA committed over \$10 million to provide air conditioners to about 22,000 households.

And the City has provided free tablets and internet service to 10,000 NYCHA seniors to help them stay connected to their friends and family as well as critical online resources.

Lessons Learned

During this extraordinary experience, we have gained some lessons learned that will strengthen our work going forward. For instance, we want to incorporate some of the best practices we applied during the pandemic – such as enhanced cleanings, a transparent cleaning schedule, and related QA inspections – into our regular

maintenance program. We also increased our level of communication with residents and external partners, which always makes for a more productive partnership.

For example, the feedback we received from resident leaders and other stakeholders improved our disinfection process.

Supporting Each Other

The coronavirus has changed all of our lives. But amidst the challenges of this rapidly changing situation, we remain guided by our top priority: the health, safety, and quality of life of our residents. To that end, we will continue to monitor and share (in various languages) the latest information and guidance from our partners and update our policies and procedures as necessary.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to thank the Council, Mayor de Blasio, and Governor Cuomo for your support, which is enabling us to address this pandemic and continue to transform the Housing Authority. In addition to supporting the fundamentals of our work as a landlord, our partnership is providing residents with access to testing and other vital resources, such as face coverings and hand sanitizer.

Most of all, we would like to thank the many resident leaders who are putting themselves on the front line of this pandemic. They are organizing food drives and PPE distribution and conducting their own wellness checks of neighbors. Time and time again, NYCHA residents show the world that we are a strong and resilient community which looks out for one another.

Even though this is a time of uncertainty, the one thing that we do know is that we must support each other and work together to help our fellow New Yorkers. We're all in this together, and we'll get through this together.

Thank you. We are happy to answer any questions you may have, and I look forward to our continued collaboration in service to this great city.



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND BUILDINGS RELEVANT TO TENANT SAFETY AND BUILDING SANITATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

June 29, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to testify as the City Council explores the topic of tenant safety and building sanitation during the COVID-19 public health crisis.

The members of the Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) and SEIU 32BJ have worked tirelessly since the start of this crisis to help New Yorkers stay safe and healthy in their homes. As essential workers, residential building managers and building service workers have been on the front lines of combatting COVID-19. We are immensely proud of the work of our members and grateful for the sacrifices they and their families continue to make during these difficult times, particularly those who lost their lives.

REBNY and SEIU 32BJ are proud to have worked together during the crisis to adopt aggressive health and safety protocols for residential buildings. As New York State on Pause was put into effect, we quickly worked to provide our members with the most up-to-date guidance available to ensure the appropriate cleaning and disinfection and safety protocols were followed in residential buildings. Based on these experiences, we then worked collectively to inform the State's interim guidance for residential buildings, which establish strong protocols that residential buildings must follow as part of the reopening of the State's economy.

Based on the State's interim guidance as well as the recommended practices of federal and local public health authorities, we, along with the Realty Advisory Board on Labor Relations (RAB), released industry wide guidelines for safety in market-rate residential buildings including multifamily rentals, cooperatives, and condominiums. These joint guidelines provide comprehensive strategies for property owners and managers to help protect the health and safety of residents, staff, and visitors as New York City resumes greater professional and social activities. The guidelines cover topics including building system operations, screening outside vendors, entry and exit procedures, protection of building service workers, amenity spaces, signage, and cleaning and disinfection. These guidelines are being updated as new recommendations and rules are established by public health authorities and a copy of the most recent update is attached to this testimony.

While New York City has come a long way since the depths of the crisis, we know that we all must continue to diligently follow the recommendation of public health authorities for progress to continue. As

always, we stand ready to assist our policymakers and government to keep all New Yorkers healthy and safe. Together, we are committed to doing so.

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Center for Court Innovation - Testimony
New York City Council
Joint hearing between the Public Housing and Housing and Buildings
Monday, June 29th at 1:00pm

Good day. My name is Marissa Williams and I am a Housing Specialist at the Red Hook Community Justice Center (“Justice Center”), a multi-jurisdictional community court and project of the Center for Court Innovation. I work in our Housing Resource Center with tenants of the Red Hook East and West NYCHA developments. Every day I set out to preserve the affordability of public housing and advocate against the unsafe and unhealthy lack of repairs at NYCHA. I’m also a lifelong resident of NYCHA having seen Red Hook at its worst and its best.

Since COVID-19 shut down the court system, our Justice Center team has made nearly 2,000 phone calls to NYCHA residents completing 350 surveys about: health concerns, rent issues, repairs, food needs, wellness and family safety. We’ve heard over 50 emergency repair issues, and coordinated with NYCHA to respond. Emergency repairs during the pandemic have included: stove gas outages, water leaks, mold growth, loss of power, deteriorating walls and water supply outages. Despite their own limited staffing during COVID, frontline NYCHA staff have engaged with us in extensive problem-solving on emergency repairs. The cleaning crews that come to Red Hook have been present three times a week wiping down the broken and otherwise unmaintained doors, walls and elevators. I appreciate seeing them go floor by floor to care for our buildings.

Twin Public Health Crises Hitting NYCHA: COVID and Repairs

I want to speak today because there has been an on-going public health crisis at NYCHA long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Health and safety in public housing starts from inside the apartment. Every day we see uninhabitable apartment conditions causing respiratory problems, lead poisoning, constant stress and severe emotional tolls upon residents. We know that mold and water leaks from capital disinvestment contribute to underlying health conditions like asthma. We also know from the Centers for Disease Control that these very same health conditions put senior citizens and others at greater risk of getting very sick from COVID-19.

Minimum habitability conditions are required to be provided by all landlords, including NYCHA, under this Council’s Local Laws within the Housing Maintenance Code. NYCHA continues to be in regular violation of these laws with 246 violations recorded at the Red Hook Houses in the first three months of 2020. Last year, residents filed 212 HP Action complaints at the Red Hook Community Justice Center’s housing court that documented 1,060 violations throughout the Red Hook Houses, including: 77 concealed leaks in walls; 41 leaks from pipes and faucets; and 58 hazardous mold conditions.

Interagency Oversight

We also see how other city agencies often turn a blind eye to the problems at NYCHA. My team and I are now responding directly to emergency repair complaints because Code Enforcement inspectors from the city’s Housing Preservation and Development (“HPD”) are not currently available due to the court’s suspended operations, and those inspections are not directly accessible for public housing tenants through the city’s 3-1-1 system. Moreover, large construction projects are finally

underway from Superstorm Sandy Recovery to address outside building issues in Red Hook; yet, just last week workers caused a water main break cutting off tap water for half the development. The normal construction safety fence signs required by the Department of Buildings (“DOB”) are absent from these worksites. Furthermore, when residents experience gas outages lasting for months at a time, the standard Notice of Service Interruption are not provided by NYCHA as is required by this Council’s Local Law 47 of 2015. This City Council should ensure that NYCHA is in compliance with the oversight rules that apply to all other multiple dwellings not just during this pandemic, but always.

Thank you for your time and giving me the opportunity to share my testimony with you today. The tenants of NYCHA want their buildings to be safe, healthy and clean. I look forward to your leadership in this area going forward.

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Red Hook Community Justice Center

June 29, 2020

CAAAY: Asian Tenants Union Testimony

Public housing at Queensbridge Houses is in crisis. As we spoke with tenants and sanitation workers in Queensbridge, we heard that tenants are scared to take elevators, confused about communication for programs like rent hardship, and unable to reach the management office. The workers were given one mask per break, and did not seem to know how to properly sanitize or dispose of contaminants.

One of the key pressing issues in Queensbridge Houses are structural impediments for tenants who have trouble with getting in and out of the building. Is the New York City Council aware that in a development that houses hundreds of seniors and tenants that need aid walking, there are seven steep steps between the first floor elevator and the front door of *every single building*? In addition, the elevators only go up to the fifth floor despite many wheelchair-bound tenants living on the sixth floor.

There are added risks for tenants that rely on elevators, stairwells, and even flooring to enter and leave the building during the pandemic. We need the City Council to be accountable and listen to tenants who have been coping for decades and fix this egregious problem that traps tenants in wheelchairs and with mobility challenges inside.