Committee on Public Housing

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**Committee on Public Housing**

Hon. Alicka Ampry-Samuel, Chair

**February 24, 2021**

**Oversight: Public Safety at NYCHA**

1. **Introduction**

On February 24, 2021, the Committee on Public Housing, chaired by Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel, will hold an oversight hearing entitled “Public Safety at NYCHA.” The hearing will focus on the New York City Housing Authority’s (NYCHA) strategies to encourage safety and protect residents. Witnesses invited to testify include NYCHA, the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ), the New York City Police Department (NYPD), legal services providers, and other interested parties.

1. **BACKGROUND ON NYCHA**

Former New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia created NYCHA in 1934 by replacing dilapidated tenements using funds from The New Deal,[[1]](#footnote-1) three years before the Housing Act of 1937 established public housing nationwide.[[2]](#footnote-2) NYCHA originally served two purposes: (1) to provide low-cost housing for middle-class, working families temporarily unemployed because of the Great Depression, and (2) to bolster the lagging economy by creating jobs for building trades.[[3]](#footnote-3) Later, NYCHA’s purpose evolved into providing safe, decent housing for families with the lowest incomes.[[4]](#footnote-4) Currently, NYCHA has 316 developments, 2,351 buildings, and 173,762 units that are home to 381,159 authorized residents, making it the largest public housing authority in North America.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Numerous incidents of violence have occurred at NYCHA developments in recent months, several of which are detailed in section VI below, prompting calls for greater scrutiny over NYCHA’s efforts to improve safety and security at its developments.

1. **MAYOR’S ACTION PLAN FOR NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY**

One of the City’s main strategies for addressing public safety concerns and reducing crime at certain NYCHA developments is detailed in the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety (MAP).[[6]](#footnote-6) MAP seeks to address safety at NYCHA by addressing factors underlying public safety: improving opportunities, promoting design with safety in mind, and increasing trust between residents and government.[[7]](#footnote-7) Since 2014, the MAP initiative has targeted fifteen developments at NYCHA,[[8]](#footnote-8) which together house approximately 60,000 New Yorkers and see almost one-fifth of all crime at NYCHA.[[9]](#footnote-9) The fifteen targeted developments are Boulevard, Brownsville, Bushwick, Butler, Castle Hill, Ingersoll, Patterson, Polo Grounds, Queensbridge, Red Hook, St. Nicholas, Stapleton, Tompkins, Van Dyke, and Wagner.[[10]](#footnote-10) The plan has numerous components: Neighborhoodstat (NeighborhoodStat), Summer Youth Employment Program, Next STEPS, Kids in Motion, Neighborhood Activation,; each of which is explained in greater detail below.[[11]](#footnote-11) MOCJ is tasked with implementing MAP and coordinating various partner agencies and offices, including NYCHA, NYPD, the Department for the Aging (DFTA), the Department of Probation (DOP), the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the Human Resources Administration (HRA), the Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), the Mayor’s Office to End Domestic and Gender Based Violence (ENDGBV), and the Mayor’s Office of Operations (MOO).[[12]](#footnote-12) In March 2020, MAP and its partners began shifting their programs and services into emergency preparedness in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.[[13]](#footnote-13)

At a 2014 Committee on Public Housing hearing entitled “A Safer NYCHA and the Mayor’s Plan to Reduce Violent Crime at Public Housing,” the Administration testified that MAP was “not a one-shot deal” and was the beginning of a long-term commitment to improving safety at NYCHA developments.[[14]](#footnote-14) NYCHA further testified that its goal was to transport successful strategies from MAP sites and replicate results in all developments.[[15]](#footnote-15)

On June 6, 2019, this Committee conducted a joint oversight hearing with the Committee on Public Safety entitled “Safety and Security in NYCHA.”[[16]](#footnote-16) At that hearing, the Committees heard testimony from MOCJ and learned that, at that point, MAP sites had seen a 9% overall reduction in total index crimes, with violent crime falling 8% between 2014 and 2018, outpacing the 4% decline at non-MAP sites during the same period.[[17]](#footnote-17) MOCJ also testified that it was in the process of conducting an evaluation of MAP.[[18]](#footnote-18) Additionally, the Committees heard testimony from NYCHA regarding its efforts to create safer communities, in particular, through investing in infrastructural enhancements, including cameras, exterior lighting, and layered access controls.[[19]](#footnote-19) NYCHA testified that, with respect to exterior lighting, the following measures had taken place: (1) since 2014, it had installed 8,000 exterior lights at 78 developments—a $101 million investment, (2) the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York had invested over $6 million of lighting at 13 sites in two years, and (3) NYCHA had put up 586 light towers to disrupt criminal activity.[[20]](#footnote-20) NYCHA testified that it had also installed nearly 16,600 security cameras at over 200 developments, investing over $200 million in cameras and other security enhancements since 2014,[[21]](#footnote-21) and that NYCHA relies on Council funding to install new cameras.[[22]](#footnote-22) Of particular note, NYCHA testified that there were currently no cameras installed at Woodson Houses,[[23]](#footnote-23) a senior building that had experienced violent crime and has recently been in the news again for the arrest of an alleged serial killer in the development.[[24]](#footnote-24) NYCHA also testified that it had installed new layered access controls, intercoms, and front door key fobs and hardware at 425 buildings in 76 developments.[[25]](#footnote-25)

According to the most recent Mayor’s Management Report, in Fiscal Year 2020 the components and improvements listed below were made at the fifteen developments targeted by the MAP program.[[26]](#footnote-26)

1. *NeighborhoodStat*

NeighborhoodStat is a community based problem-solving process where MAP’s partners have several meetings with NYCHA residents to share, analyze and use data that identifies public safety priorities.[[27]](#footnote-27) These meetings are intended to help ensure that City officials are aware of crime and other neighborhood issues that have not been resolved.[[28]](#footnote-28) The local NeighborhoodStat meetings provide residents with a mechanism to identify neighborhood priorities, and address resident concerns.[[29]](#footnote-29) In Fiscal Year 2020, MAP hosted fifteen local NeighborhoodStat meetings, large-scale community events at each MAP development.[[30]](#footnote-30) The purpose of these meetings is to build trust with the community and to provide residents with information.

1. *Summer Youth Employment Program*

Another component of MAP, the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), seeks to connect youth to employment opportunities intended to provide valuable skills and job readiness.[[31]](#footnote-31) Beginning in 2017, NYCHA youth from the ages of 14-24 who reside in MAP developments were eligible for summer employment opportunities.[[32]](#footnote-32) In summer 2019, during Fiscal Year 2020, 2,961 residents enrolled in SYEP.[[33]](#footnote-33)

1. *Next STEPS*

The Next STEPS program is a MAP initiative that offers both one-on-one and group mentoring within a curriculum designed to help young adults make behavioral changes and avoid criminal activity.[[34]](#footnote-34) In FY 2020, there were 185 participants enrolled in the Next STEPS program, with 128 participants who positively exited the program.[[35]](#footnote-35)

1. *Kids in Motion and Shape-Up*

Other programs offered by DPR to promote exercise and movement include Kids in Motion,[[36]](#footnote-36) in which DPR engages children in active outdoor play with DPR staff in four to seven hours of activities in New York City playgrounds, and Shape-Up,[[37]](#footnote-37) which offers free group fitness programs. In FY 2020, there were 45,622 participants in Kids in Motion across MAP sites,[[38]](#footnote-38) and 20,128 participants in Shape-Up across MAP sites.[[39]](#footnote-39)

1. *Neighborhood Activation*

The Neighborhood Activation program is meant to facilitate improvement of safety through changes to the built environment.[[40]](#footnote-40) The Neighborhood Activation Playbook serves as a guide on how to “activate,” or transform, public spaces, including open spaces, streets and sidewalks, and parks and gardens, at MAP sites.[[41]](#footnote-41)

1. *Quality of Life Evaluation*

The MAP program partnered with John Jay College, NYCHA, and Ideas 42, a non-profit that uses behavioral science to address social issues,[[42]](#footnote-42) to design practicable solutions to manage trash and pet waste at NYCHA developments.[[43]](#footnote-43) Between June and August 2019, Ideas 42 conducted a trial at 27 test sites to study whether an education and outreach campaign and installing additional tilt trucks and trash cans would improve waste management.[[44]](#footnote-44) Ideas 42 published a report in July 2020,[[45]](#footnote-45) finding that adding more tilt trucks and trash cans and conducting an outreach campaign resulted in a reduction in the amount of trash, litter and dog waste at those NYCHA sites.[[46]](#footnote-46)

1. *Evaluating Crime Statistics*

In 2017, John Jay College of Criminal Justice within the City University of New York (CUNY) began an evaluation of MAP and its component parts,[[47]](#footnote-47) releasing an interim report in June 2020.[[48]](#footnote-48) In its study, researchers compared reported crime trends at MAP sites with trends at all non-MAP sites, comparing the 4.5 years prior to the launch of MAP (January 2010 through June 2014) and the 5.5 years following its launch (July 2014 through December 2019).[[49]](#footnote-49) The study found that, between the pre-MAP and post-MAP periods, monthly crimes listed in the seven index crimes (murder, rape, robbery, felony assault, burglary, grand larceny and grand larceny auto) declined at MAP sites by 7.5%, whereas they declined by 3.8% at non-MAP sites.[[50]](#footnote-50)

1. **INFRASTRUCTURE SECURITY DEFICIENCIES AT NYCHA**

In October 2018, the New York City Comptroller’s Office released an investigative survey of NYCHA doors.[[51]](#footnote-51) The Comptroller’s team visited 299 NYCHA developments, and found that 195 developments (65%) had unsecured doors. Sixty-one developments were deemed “severely vulnerable” as over half of their entrance doors were unlocked. Across all inspected developments, the survey revealed hundreds of broken latches, busted locks, and doors held open by chains and rope.[[52]](#footnote-52) Additionally, 47% of all front entrances were not equipped with security cameras.[[53]](#footnote-53) The Comptroller’s Office shared the results of the survey with NYCHA, and informed NYCHA that developments with nonfunctioning locking mechanisms may be in violation of the Rules of the City of New York.[[54]](#footnote-54) The Comptroller additionally called upon NYCHA to conduct a comprehensive review of its security and maintenance systems and procedures; regularly inspect all exterior doors and maintain all doors and locks in good working order; repair or replace all damaged exterior doors identified in the survey and equip them with sturdy, functional hardware; and ensure that security cameras are operational and located at all publicly accessible entrances and exits.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Two months later, in December 2018, NYCHA announced that seven developments across Manhattan would receive $13 million in safety and security upgrades.[[56]](#footnote-56) The planned upgrades include exterior LED lighting, and closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance systems.[[57]](#footnote-57) Although some residents are wary of security cameras generally and police surveillance specifically,[[58]](#footnote-58) others cite the absence of security cameras and security guards at their buildings as risk factors for crime.[[59]](#footnote-59)

1. **GOVERNOR’S FUNDING FOR SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS AT NYCHA**

In the 2016 State Enacted Budget, the State allocated $100 million to the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York (DASNY) for small capital projects, security upgrades, and grounds improvements.[[60]](#footnote-60) At the Committee on Public Housing’s Fiscal Year 2020 Preliminary Budget hearing, NYCHA testified that the $100 million provides: $51.5 million for security upgrades; $20.4 million for appliances; and $28.2 for quality of life projects, such as community center improvement, landscaping, and playground upgrades.[[61]](#footnote-61) NYCHA additionally testified that there were 215 planned projects and, as of March 2019, 111 had been completed (which is approximately 51% of those planned).[[62]](#footnote-62)

1. **ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

Despite the implementation of MAP at select NYCHA sites and other efforts to improve public safety at NYCHA, there has been an increase in crime reports at NYCHA over the course of the pandemic. Early into the pandemic, the New York Post reported that shootings, burglaries and auto thefts at public housing complexes skyrocketed during the COVID lockdown. Auto thefts surged 38% in the four weeks ending May 10, and shootings and burglaries each increased 17% during that same period.[[63]](#footnote-63) Recently, an alleged serial killer was arrested in connection to the strangling of a 78-year-old woman at the Woodson senior housing development in Brownsville, as well as two previous murders in the same complex.[[64]](#footnote-64) Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, NYCHA has seen several reports of gun-related violence, including, for instance:

* On, February 13, 2021, it was reported that a Bronx groundkeeper was arrested for stolen property. When the cops cuffed him, the grounds keeper was carrying an illegal handgun.[[65]](#footnote-65)
* On February 12, 2021, a man was shot outside of Red Hook Houses around 3:10 a.m. The 28-year-old victim was rushed to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. According to the New York Post, two firearms were recovered on the scene and the murder was still under investigations.[[66]](#footnote-66)
* On January 26, 2021, a man shot his mother in Lehman Houses, less than six months after he had threatened to kill her. The assailant fled the scene and fired several shots at a second victim. It is unclear why he shot the second victim.[[67]](#footnote-67)
* On January 23, 2021, a 24-year-old man suffered multiple gunshot wounds to the torso outside Whitman Houses and was pronounced dead at Brooklyn Hospital.[[68]](#footnote-68) On December 27, 2020, a man was shot dead on a NYCHA basketball court. The victim, in his twenties, was shot in the neck and died at the scene.[[69]](#footnote-69)
* On October 30, 2020, three suspects were charged for shooting a man and wounding another during a robbery outside a Bronx NYCHA building.[[70]](#footnote-70)
* On October 21, 2020, a teenager was charged with murdering a NYCHA worker as he was tending the ground of Astoria Houses on April 9. [[71]](#footnote-71)
* On September 23, 2020, a young girl in Lester Paterson Houses was shot and was rushed into a local hospital. The police arrested the mother’s boyfriend in the shooting.[[72]](#footnote-72)
* On September 12, 2020, a man was shot at Ingersoll Houses and was declared dead when he arrived at the houses. [[73]](#footnote-73)
* On August 18, 2020, a shooting occurred outside of Ravenswood Houses that left three teenagers injured and a man in critical condition after he was shot in the head.[[74]](#footnote-74)
* On July 4, 2020, it was reported that a teen was shot outside Washington Houses. [[75]](#footnote-75)

In addition to an uptick in reports of gun-related violence, there have also been several reports of gang-related activity at NYCHA during the pandemic. Some examples include:

* On February 16, 2021, a man was shot inside Pomonok Houses. The victim was taken to the hospital and treated for his injuries and was later released. NYPD stated that the shooting is likely to be gang related.[[76]](#footnote-76)
* On February 12, 2021, police arrested 14 individuals aboard a party bus that had been chartered for an alleged member of a street gang member. The police stopped the vehicle and found 58 rounds of ammunition and multiple guns. Two of the individuals who were arrested were in their twenties, nine were 18 or 19 years old, two were 17 year olds, and one was 16 years old.[[77]](#footnote-77)
* On January 6, 2021, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported 15 alleged members of the 900 street gang had been charged in a 77-count indictment with murder, conspiracy to commit murder and weapon possession, attempted murder and other related charges. The gang was especially active in several NYCHA housing projects.[[78]](#footnote-78)
* On December 12, 2020, four people were wounded in a gang shooting at the Warren Houses. One of the victims was a NYCHA employee. All of the victims are expected to survive. Some of the victims have a criminal records and are part of a local gang.[[79]](#footnote-79)
* According to NYPD, gang activity has been a growing issue at Howard Houses, including drug use in hallways and stairwells.[[80]](#footnote-80) As of October 24, 2020, Howard Houses’ four homicides led NYCHA projects in the city. In the same period in 2019, the housing complex had zero publicly reported homicides. [[81]](#footnote-81)

Today, the Committee on Public Housing intends to examine the responses by City agencies and NYCHA to violent crime ocurring within NYCHA developments. Specifically, the Committee hope to gain a better understanding of the impact of MAP, including its successes, challenges, and whether the City plans to expand MAP to other developments. The Committee also expects to hear testimony on the City’s plan to secure unlocked doors, install cameras, improve lighting and other conditions to make NYCHA properties and neighborhoods safer.

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6. *See* Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, *Learn About MAP*, <https://map.cityofnewyork.us/learn-about-map/> (last accessed Feb. 16, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *See* Fiscal 2020 Mayor's Management Report, at 33, *available at* <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2020/2020_mmr.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *See id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jake Bittle and Jasper Craven, *Do NYCHA’s $80 Million Crime-Reducing Lights Actually Reduce Crime?*, *available at* <http://gothamist.com/2018/05/14/nycha_bright_lights_crime.php> (May 14, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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11. *See supra*, note 7, at 33–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Id.* at 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Id.* at 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. New York City Council Public Housing Committee, “A Safer NYCHA and the Mayor’s Plan to Reduce Violent Crime at Public Housing” on September 16, 2014. The transcript, testimony, and other relevant materials are available online at <https://tinyurl.com/y2gv525c>. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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26. *See* *supra*, note 7 at 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Id.* at 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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30. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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