

TESTIMONY FOR NYCHA CHAIRMAN JOHN B. RHEA

**OVERSIGHT – AN EYE TOWARDS SAFETY –
EXAMINING NYCHA’S SAFETY AND SECURITY TASK FORCE**

CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON PUBLIC HOUSING AND PUBLIC SAFETY

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2011 – 10:00 AM

16TH FLOOR COMMITTEE ROOM, 250 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, NY

Chairwoman Rosie Mendez, Chairman Peter Vallone Jr., Members of their respective Committees, and to all Members of the City Council, thank you for this opportunity to discuss with you the New York City Housing Authority’s (NYCHA) strategy and efforts to enhance the security of our City’s public housing communities. I appreciate not only the attention you are bringing to this critical issue today, but also your ongoing support for improving the quality of life for NYCHA’s residents. I am NYCHA’s Chairman, John B. Rhea. And joining me this morning are Deputy General Manager for Operations Gloria Finkelman, as well as other senior members of NYCHA’s team, and Assistant Chief Edward Delatorre, the Executive Officer of the NYPD’s Housing Bureau and a member of the NYCHA Safety and Security Task Force.

Nothing is more important than the safety of NYCHA’s families. Security is a cornerstone of a neighborhood’s health and stability; and providing for the safety of those under its care must be the first priority of any governing body, agency or council. As NYCHA develops a long-term vision for the preservation of public housing, improving the quality of life for our residents by providing safeguards for their well-being and implementing strategies that will reduce both the likelihood and incidence of crime are critically important.

But NYCHA cannot do this urgent work alone. As you know, NYCHA is not a law enforcement agency, nor are we experts on crime prevention. To that end, the Authority has engaged a number of partners throughout the city to work with us on improving the safety of NYCHA's communities. Beginning with a core group of key stakeholders, including the duly elected Citywide Council of Presidents, Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly and senior leadership from the New York City Police Department (NYPD), and a team of NYCHA's senior managers, the NYCHA Safety and Security Task Force (Task Force) was formed in December 2009. Since that time, the Task Force has collaborated with the Office of the Mayor; the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor for New York City; the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development; the New York County District Attorney's Community Affairs Unit; the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and many others.

Over the past year, the Task Force has worked to improve stakeholder relationships and identify vulnerabilities in our current security systems, designed strategies to address those challenges, and provided a framework for how we can consistently improve safety over the long term. Today, I would like to discuss some of the Task Force's findings and recommendations.

Resident Safety and Security Survey

The Task Force divided their work among five subcommittees: 1. Resident Safety and Security Survey; 2. Security Measures; 3. Resident Engagement; 4. NYPD Policies and Relationship with Residents; and 5. NYCHA Rules and Regulations.

First, in collaboration with the Resident Associations, NYCHA and the NYPD created the Resident Safety and Security Survey to gauge residents' concerns, as well as gather ideas for how to improve community safety. Of 10,000 surveys mailed to households throughout 12 developments, NYCHA collected and analyzed 1,100 completed surveys. The sampled communities represent a mix of NYCHA's developments: very large or small; served by Police Service Areas (PSAs) or local police precincts; with and without closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras; low to high crime rates; and family or senior-only developments. The results of this survey are available in the "Safety and Security Task Force Report," which will be released this afternoon.

Furthermore, as part of NYCHA's five year Plan to Preserve Public Housing, the Authority partnered with Baruch College's Survey Research Unit to conduct a detailed 61-question telephone survey, including a specific series of questions concerning safety, security and perceptions of crime, of more than one thousand public housing residents and more than 600 Section 8 participants—one of the largest and data rich "satisfaction and perception" inquiries of public housing and Section 8 residents ever conducted. The data from this survey are still being analyzed and the full results will be available later this year as part of the Plan to Preserve Public Housing.

Some of what we discovered confirmed our concerns; other findings surprised us. Briefly, when we asked residents how fearful they were about crime in their development, we found that more than three-quarters of public housing residents at the selected developments were very or somewhat fearful about crime in their development.

Nearly 60 percent of respondents reported that serious crimes had occurred in their development during the previous year. However, only six percent of residents surveyed reported that they were a victim of crime within their development. Therefore, we recognize that our efforts must both combat actual crime, as well as address residents' perceptions of crime, which erode their quality of life.

The data collected from our residents continues to inform the Task Force's work. We understand that investing in new technology and creating enhanced security measures will take us only so far without the trust and cooperation of NYCHA's residents. By working together—with our residents and our partners at the NYPD, in the City Council and throughout New York City—the Authority's security strategy seeks to accomplish four goals: improve our physical security infrastructure; deter crime; discourage and redress "evidence of disorder," such as broken doors and urine in elevators, all of which can lead to further and more serious crime; and assist our residents in complying with all NYCHA guidelines.

Improving NYCHA's Physical Security Infrastructure

First, we must make it more difficult to commit crime within NYCHA developments. Our current security infrastructure is not comprehensive, resulting in stand-alone systems that cannot efficiently manage new system demands or communicate across technology platforms. Upgrades to our systems will correct these vulnerabilities, as well as improve access control to NYCHA's buildings.

To that end, the Task Force has recommended that the Authority install a “layered” access control system. Residents will be issued electronic key tags, or “Fobs,” instead of keys to their building’s entrance. Electronic key tags are easily modified to remove key holders from the system and to remove keys that have been lost or stolen. The layered system will also include direct call intercoms that don’t rely on telephone company infrastructure. Residents will be able to freely change their telephone service provider, even if they choose to use only a cellular phone, and maintain their ability to utilize their building’s intercom system.

This new system will add a mechanical component to our doors as well, and will allow NYCHA’s doors to remain secure even if the electronic component fails or is compromised. All access control components will be designed to sustain frequent use and reduce vandalism. The design will also allow for “rapid repair” or replacement of a failed component, reducing repair lag time and discouraging further vandalism.

Finally, all components of the layered access control system will have sensors that are able to transmit an electronic notification to a central monitoring site indicating that the device has been vandalized or has failed.

Because of a \$250,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and additional matching funds from NYCHA, Mott Haven Houses in the Bronx, located in Council Member Arroyo’s district, will be the first pilot location for our new system and is scheduled for installation this summer.

The Authority is also investigating hiring security personnel to serve at a number of our developments. NYCHA currently employs security personnel in our senior developments and we believe there are benefits to having security officers to perform access control, respond to emergencies, enforce NYCHA guidelines, provide service to residents and act as liaisons with members of the NYPD. And we plan to improve development lighting to enhance natural surveillance for police officers, security personnel and residents alike. None of these proposals are without cost and we will need to work with our elected officials to identify funding sources.

One area where the City Council has been particularly helpful is in providing funding for CCTV cameras. Currently, 20 percent of NYCHA developments have some form of CCTV, most of which were made possible by approximately \$21 million in funding from Council Members' discretionary budgets. Additionally, NYCHA has received, but not yet spent, almost \$30 million from the Council for further CCTV installation. Data supports NYCHA's belief that CCTV cameras are most effective as part of a comprehensive effort, such as a layered access system, capital improvements and active system monitoring. We have already met with many Council Members and the Speaker to discuss our proposed plan. We appreciate the support and collaborative engagement, and we hope to continue working with the Council to implement the Authority's broader strategy.

As you may know, at one time NYCHA received more than \$30 million from the federal government for drug elimination activities. During the previous administration, these funds were eliminated and never restored. As a result, NYCHA is forced to use operating funds for these efforts, diverting much needed capital from the maintenance

and preservation of our housing stock. We will need to work creatively together to address these funding challenges.

Resident Engagement

Second, we must work together to deter crime. The concept of a neighborhood watch is as old as neighborhoods themselves. Relying on the principles of civic engagement and mutual concern, collaborating with our residents is central to NYCHA's strategy for improving development security over the long term.

To that end, the Task Force has re-launched NYCHA's Tenant Patrol program as the Resident Watch. Beginning with support from Mayor Bloomberg's Office and an \$85,000 grant to re-brand the program and provide volunteers with official Resident Watch gear, NYCHA is developing Resident Watch in accordance with the principles and preparation of exceptional neighborhood associations. We are working to re-engage residents who are already committed members of their development's Resident Watch teams, as well as actively recruit new volunteers. The NYPD, in cooperation with resident leaders, Resident Watch supervisors and NYCHA, revised the training curriculum that all Resident Watch supervisors now receive. NYCHA is also working with the NYPD to create additional training that will mirror some of the preparation Auxiliary Police Officers receive. And in Brooklyn, the NYPD has piloted an effort involving designated officers and Resident Watch teams to better coordinate activities and share information.

Similarly, we are working together to strengthen community support for residents who help to reduce crime at their developments. And because research shows that victims of bullying are between two and nine times more likely to consider suicide, and because bullying all too often leads to escalated risk of our young people carrying weapons or joining gangs, NYCHA partnered with Utterly Global to provide anti-bullying training to NYCHA staff at our community centers last summer and we hope to continue this effort. Reducing incidence of crime among our youth and young adults is a top priority.

We must also be better neighbors. NYCHA recognizes that proper delivery of social services is often a pillar of individual well-being and overall community health. So we have developed a four part approach to improve how NYCHA delivers social services:

1. Increase public awareness of available social services;
2. Enhance direct engagement with residents and resident leaders to streamline the referral process for those who may need to take advantage of those services;
3. Improve training for NYCHA staff on how to make social services referrals; and
4. Create liaisons between NYCHA and the NYPD to share information when necessary.

Preventing and Combating Crime through Better Coordination

NYCHA, the NYPD and other city, state and federal law enforcement agencies who serve our communities understand that some responsibilities of keeping neighborhoods safe can only be addressed through effective policing and improved communication between organizations. Last year, NYCHA partnered with other law enforcement agencies, including the New York City Department of Investigation, resulting in more than 200 arrests of individuals who committed serious felonies, including narcotics distribution,

narcotics possession with the intent to distribute, and weapons charges. Our joint law enforcement activities are active and on-going and more arrests are expected this year.

Improving the Resident-Police Officer Relationship

As I mentioned earlier, our efforts will go only so far without the cooperation of NYCHA's residents. And NYCHA and the NYPD are committed to working together to re-establish positive, mutually respectful resident-police officer relationships.

Following recommendations from the Task Force and with the assistance of NYCHA, the NYPD is increasing its efforts to recruit NYCHA residents for enrollment in the Youth Police Academy, the Law Enforcement Exploring program, and Explorer Academy. As some of you may know, the Youth Police Academy is a six-week summer program for young people that reinforces life skills and aims to provide positive recreation. The Law Enforcement Exploring program is designed to promote an interest in law enforcement among youth and young adults between the ages of 14 to 20. And the Explorer Academy is a free summer program that motivates Explorers to become responsible, engaged citizens by teaching positive character and career development, leadership, and life skills. Police officers serve as mentors and participate in activities alongside participants in all three programs and NYCHA has committed to informing our residents and helping the NYPD recruit among NYCHA's talented youth.

We're also partnering to increase involvement of police officers in community center programs and activities, providing opportunities for NYCHA youth and police officers to interact in a positive environment. NYCHA's Community Operations department will

work closely with the NYPD in our Cops and Kids program, which will bring officers together with NYCHA youth for overnight camping trips, pair NYCHA youth with members of the Police Athletic League to go bowling, and encourage Housing Bureau Cadets and Law Enforcement Explorers to participate in NYCHA's Annual Kids' Walk, Annual Talent Show, Resident Art Show and Citywide Olympics, among many other community events.

Furthermore, the NYPD, in cooperation with resident leaders, has developed new patrol guidelines for public housing officers based on the principle that police officers are "service providers." To date, nearly 3,000 police officers have received new guideline training and nearly all officers assigned to the Housing Bureau and the Precinct Housing Teams have received training. Throughout 2011 the remainder of the Patrol Service Bureau, as well as members of the Detective Bureau and Organized Crime Control Bureau, are scheduled to be trained, and officers who have already received training will receive a refresher course. The NYPD has committed to create a new training video for members of the Department that will focus on mutual respect and courtesy. And the NYPD will continue to solicit feedback at community meetings and other forums, and NYCHA will continue to engage our residents for feedback on the progress of these and other efforts.

NYCHA Rules and Regulations

Finally, NYCHA must ensure that our guidelines are consistently posted and clearly communicated. The Task Force outlined a series of recommendations, including making the Authority's signs standard citywide, including signs at NYCHA parks and

play areas; mailing a document highlighting Authority guidelines to NYCHA households annually; establishing rules governing moving in and out of NYCHA developments; and monitoring NYCHA parking lots and consistently enforcing parking rules.

Conclusion

Today, through the work of our Task Force and the many partners who have joined us in this effort, NYCHA has the most collaborative safety and security strategy in the Authority's history. But safety, although central, is only one measure of a community's health. NYCHA looks forward to continue engaging our residents and other key stakeholders as we develop our long term Plan to Preserve Public Housing. And we hope to continue the conversation with the City Council on how we can best advance our commitment to enhancing the quality of life for NYCHA's families and promoting the health and prosperity of every NYCHA neighborhood.