

TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA CHAIRMAN JOHN RHEA
EMERGENCY PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT DURING AND AFTER THE STORM:
NYCHA EMERGENCY PLANNING AND RESPONSE
CITY COUNCIL PUBLIC HOUSING COMMITTEE
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Chairwoman Rosie Mendez, members of the Public Housing Committee, and other distinguished members of the City Council, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the New York City Housing Authority's Hurricane Emergency Procedure and its implementation before, during, and after Superstorm Sandy. I am John Rhea, Chairman of the New York City Housing Authority, and with me at the dais today are Cecil House, General Manager, Carlos Laboy-Diaz, Executive Vice President for Operations, and Natalie Rivers, Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer.

As an agency serving over 600,000 New Yorkers – and an employer of roughly 12,000 – we at the New York City Housing Authority take our responsibility to prepare residents and staff for emergencies very seriously. Accordingly, we have had a Hurricane Emergency Procedure in place since 1964 and have updated it, as needed, since then. Like much of our most important work, the procedure has changed with time, adapting to new realities, accounting for the incredibly diverse and rapidly changing communities we serve, and incorporating best practices accumulated over the years.

This afternoon, I will outline the recent history of the Hurricane Emergency Procedure, beginning with the aftermath of Hurricane Irene in August 2011 and ending with our implementation of the procedure before, during, and after Superstorm Sandy. I will also share information on our current effort to further enhance this document in advance of future storms.

After Irene

The development and maintenance of emergency procedures is an ongoing process for NYCHA – we continually refine and rework our procedures as we are

presented with new information and face new challenges. As I mentioned, the Hurricane Emergency Procedure was first established in 1964. NYCHA has refined the procedure several times since then, and after Hurricane Irene in 2011 we made yet another update.

During prior testimonies before this committee, we have shared the details of our extensive preparation effort for Irene. From that work we learned many lessons and recognized that a 21st century NYCHA would need to revamp and rethink our approach, given the increasing frequency of extreme weather events in the Northeast.

So we began an internal review of the procedure, led by our Department of Procedures Development and Administration, or DPDA. DPDA is responsible for working with administering departments to develop and maintain NYCHA's standard operating procedures, including the numerous procedures that govern specific kinds of emergencies. They're the crucial link between the research and best practices that we collect from our partners across the country and the NYCHA employees that spring to action during times of crisis.

DPDA's review resulted in the rapid formation of a cross-departmental committee tasked with revising the Hurricane Procedure. This committee, led by Natalie Rivers and DPDA, was comprised of representatives from the Departments of Capital Projects, Security, Communications, Property Management, Technical Services, Emergency Services, Research and Management Analysis, State and City Legislative Affairs, Community Programs & Development, Information Technology, Human Resources, and Family Services. Also part of the committee were several of our Property Management Borough Directors, who play a crucial role in training and overseeing front-line staff in their roles during times of crisis.

Over the course of several months, this team developed recommendations for changes to the procedure. This process took place over a series of meetings of the

entire committee, many smaller meetings between DPDA and individual Departments, and several rounds of feedback and refinement.

Concurrently, senior staff had also established contact with our partners at the City's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and FEMA immediately after the storm, sharing best practices in order to develop and implement a broader Irene After-Action Plan. This plan included items that would eventually appear in the updated Hurricane Procedure, as well as several others that called for more fundamental policy changes.

Through these efforts, the NYCHA team examined and made substantial changes and additions to every aspect of the procedure, eventually arriving at a working draft. In every case, the changes improved our capacity to respond efficiently to future hurricanes, both by providing enhanced customer service to residents and acting swiftly to secure affected buildings.

To cite some examples, the updated procedure called for NYCHA to form pre- and post-storm inspection teams to ensure the safety of residents and the soundness of our buildings; establish several non-Zone-A sites for staff to stay overnight during the storm in order to more quickly respond the next day; and develop pre-approved communications templates for flyers in multiple languages to alert residents of evacuations and other efforts.

The working draft was tested in several ways. A team of Central Office staff – led by the Departments of Emergency Services, Security, and Operations – conducted a “tabletop” exercise based on the procedure. This exercise – which also included Director-level staff from the Departments of Human Resources, Family Services, Finance, Capital Projects, and Information Technology – laid out the circumstances of a fictional hurricane, requiring team members to collaboratively problem-solve and identify areas of potential weakness in the draft procedure and other pertinent NYCHA policies. The exercise was attended and observed by crisis management experts from OEM.

In addition, several committee representatives took the updated draft back to their respective Departments for more review. The Departments included Social Services – now known as Family Services – Information Technology, Research & Management, Capital Projects, and Communications. The members of these Departments – who we knew would be critical to a successful implementation effort – provided important new insights and were also able to familiarize themselves with the document as it neared finalization.

In keeping with our annual practice, we also engaged NYCHA employees throughout September, National Preparedness Month, in a series of drills, exercises and activities meant to raise awareness of our emergency planning efforts.

Superstorm Sandy

As a result of this comprehensive process, a newly updated and approved Hurricane Emergency Procedure was in place before Superstorm Sandy reached our shores. When we confirmed with OEM that Sandy was headed toward New York and was likely to impact many public housing residents, I and the General Manager convened a conference call informing Executive Vice Presidents and other appropriate staff that the procedure had been activated. We immediately began to implement the procedure, beginning by opening our Emergency Operations Center and establishing a presence at OEM, where I was personally engaged in daily briefings with Mayor Bloomberg, Deputy Mayors, and my fellow agency heads.

NYCHA employees in the field and at headquarters continued to successfully implement the procedure throughout the storm and during the days that followed. However, as with any plan, we did have to adjust in real-time to the enormity of the challenges we faced, including the loss of power to our

headquarters offices in Lower Manhattan and the shutdown of most means of public transportation.

To give just one example of our ability to make thoughtful and effective adjustments, the procedure calls for NYCHA to transfer important equipment to the areas most likely to be affected by the storm. However, once we understood the magnitude of the storm, we decided to move this equipment – which included generators and pumps – to central locations outside of Zone A in order to ensure their safety.

Moving Forward

As Cecil House mentioned last month in our initial testimony on Superstorm Sandy, we learned many valuable lessons during the storm and know that there is much work left to do. We continue our efforts on behalf of affected residents, and have already begun work – as part of the City’s broad effort to create a Sandy After-Action Plan – to identify updates to the Hurricane Emergency Procedure. One important example is our realization of the need for local branches of our Emergency Operations Center in affected communities, so that residents, elected officials, and other stakeholders have a direct line to us and can access up-to-the-moment information and guidance.

We are also in the process of analyzing NYCHA’s role in an emergency such as this. We continue to think strategically about how we can fulfill our fundamental commitment to provide safe, secure, and affordable housing, while also facilitating access to resources that will ensure that residents receive continued services before, during, and after emergencies.

To this end, the General Manager’s office is compiling a list of lessons learned and preliminary recommendations based on feedback from employees at all levels. In addition, we have already begun the process of reaching out to important stakeholders – including residents, local elected officials, and thought

leaders in the private and non-profit sectors – to enhance and solidify these recommendations. We look forward to working with the City Council during that process, and to completing a newly updated procedure well before this year’s hurricane season.

Thank you again – I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.