

TESTIMONY FOR NYCHA General Manager Atefeh Riazi
NYCHA'S EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS INITIATIVES
CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2011 AT 10AM
14th FLOOR COMMITTEE ROOM, 250 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, NY

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Good morning Chairwoman Rosie Mendez and distinguished members of the City Council Committee on Public Housing. Thank you for providing us with this opportunity today to discuss the Emergency Preparedness initiatives of the New York City Housing Authority. I am Atefeh Riazi, Acting General Manager of the NYCHA, and I am joined today by Carlos Laboy-Diaz, Deputy General Manager for Operations, and our NYCHA Team.

As you know, NYCHA is a 24/7 operation, and providing its residents with a safe environment is of paramount importance to us. We are not new to emergency preparations and response, and our staff and procedures are well-honed from years of experience in meeting our residents' needs—whether the emergency is in one apartment, or all of our developments. Our experience comes from overseeing a city-within-a-city in New York – with our 334 developments with 2,600 buildings and 400,000 residents, NYCHA is the size of cities like Atlanta or Washington, D.C. Some of the events we face may be new, such as the recent earthquake and 9-11, but our reactions and response times are solidly in place. NYCHA's expertise is a known quantity in the city.

As did many city agencies, NYCHA participated in the Hurricane Irene efforts. In fact 1500 NYCHA workers performed tasks in shelters to ensure that both NYCHA and NYCHA residents remained safe during the storm. This, while other NYCHA staff were on call to even sleep in Development offices at night so that we

could be ready to keep our buildings and equipment safe before, during and after the Hurricane. In the most recent past, NYCHA also provided assistance during 9-11, and our community centers are routinely used as emergency facilities, including cooling centers during summer heat waves.

So far this year, NYCHA has completed 97,000 emergency work orders, and 98 percent of them were completed within 24 hours. Similar completion responses for elevator outages were at 99 percent, but please allow me to discuss how NYCHA typically responds to an emergency.

Emergency Protocols

Our Emergency Services Department, or ESD, provides management, coordination, and on-the-scene response to emergencies. The type of emergencies NYCHA will respond to include: danger or potential danger to life or limb caused by a maintenance problem, explosions/fires (the Fire Department must also be notified); gas leaks; passengers stuck in elevators; floods; power failures and apartments without electricity; main sewer and stack stoppages; apartment door and door knobs not working; toilet stoppages; and heat and hot water complaints. NYCHA responds to all of these emergencies in our Developments and other NYCHA structures throughout the 5 boroughs.

Our Customer Contact Center (CCC) is available for residents to call 24 hours a day, 7-days a week for all maintenance emergencies in their apartment or in a public space. The CCC Customer Service Representative will dispatch staff immediately for emergencies. While the development offices are closed, the CCC

will contact the appropriate NYCHA staff or other governmental agencies to make sure emergencies are addressed, but once the situation is stabilized the repairs are referred to the development for follow-up action the next working day.

ESD is responsible for immediately evaluating and coordinating a response to quickly address and abate all after-hours maintenance emergencies. ESD supervisors address and manage heating complaints by directing Borough Heating Staff and coordinating with Borough Management to rectify any problems. The ESD skill trade supervisor will address and manage complaints involving skill trades, call out and direct necessary skilled trade personnel, and coordinate with skilled trade supervisors. ESD provides follow-up actions if necessary.

NYCHA is one of the few City agencies with a 24-on call Operations Center. This makes us available to respond to emergencies city wide and to mobilize all staff as needed. ESD's Operations Center is located in our Long Island City facility, as well as eleven maintenance team bases, which are strategically located throughout the five boroughs to provide adequate emergency coverage and minimize response time.

NYCHA staff is ready to respond to the emergency needs of our residents throughout the Authority, whether it is a gas outage, water main break, or weather –related, like a snowstorm, hurricane or act of nature, such as an earthquake. As we approach the cold-weather season, the need to respond to heat and gas outages becomes more crucial, and we have protocol in place to deal with such outages as expeditiously as possible.

Natural Disasters

NYCHA's ability to mobilize 24/7 becomes especially critical when addressing large-scale, weather-related emergencies such as snowstorms and, as we saw most recently, hurricanes like Irene, which struck in August. As Hurricane Irene approached and eventually hit New York City, NYCHA staff from across the agency in concert with the Office of Emergency Management and other city agencies worked arduously to mobilize residents. We prepared resident communications in multiple languages; and provided evacuation support in flood zones. NYCHA has 26 developments and more than 45,000 residents, in the most vulnerable area – **Zone A** – areas like the Rockaways, Coney Island, the Lower East Side and Long Island City. Staff went door-to-door, posted signs and administered automated phone calls in various languages to all area development residents in Zone A alerting them to evacuate. Many NYCHA employees worked around the clock and throughout that weekend to protect lives and property. Part of the success of our efforts, particularly in Far Rockaway where we achieved an 85 percent evacuation rate, was due to the advanced work of ESD, with the leadership and oversight of Board Member Margarita López, who is also NYCHA's Environmental Coordinator. Commissioner López recognized very early that the relative remoteness of our six Rockaway developments, and their vulnerability to severe storm damage with nothing standing between them and the Atlantic Ocean, needed to be addressed early in the storm season.

In April and May of this year, Commissioner López held a series of evening community meetings that were attended by 600 residents. She provided them with the specific information they needed to be aware during any Coastal Storm Warning. This included the necessity of evacuation; planning with families and relatives on where to go; having a “go bag,” and remaining alert to all notices. Once Irene hit, many of these residents were ready to respond to evacuation notices. The storm ultimately was not devastating, but our efforts in mobilizing residents show our ability to get the word out quickly and effectively, thus avoiding potentially disastrous outcomes.

Snow Storms

During snow and icy conditions, the Authority does everything possible to provide safe passage for pedestrians, fuel oil deliveries and other supplies essential to normal development operations, and to ensure access to fuel oil lines, fire hydrants and Con Edison manholes. Removal of snow and ice receives priority over all other janitorial and grounds work and, under extreme conditions, certain maintenance tasks as well. Well ahead of the snow season, Development supervisors review equipment and sand supply to ensure maximum readiness. Equipment includes Snow pushers, long handle shovels, ice choppers, goggles, rubber boots and raincoats, gloves, and any other necessary equipment. If snow fall begins or is predicted after regular working hours, or at any time during the 24-hour period on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays, it is understood that staff is expected to be cognizant of the situation, and prepared to make the

necessary arrangements to be at the development to begin snow removal operations.

In the snowstorm that hit New York City last December in 2010 with the record-high snow fall, NYCHA takes pride in having cleared its grounds, including building entrances, sidewalks and private roads within 48-hours. We were also able to assist the City in communities adjacent to NYCHA developments.

We work hand-in-hand with City agencies, receiving a considerable amount of salt, sand and snow equipment for snow removal. NYCHA in turn, stands ready to assist the City.

Earthquake

When the earth moved on August 23, 2011, there were tremors never experienced in 100-years in New York. It took several minutes for people to recognize that it was an earthquake that shook most of the middle-Atlantic seaboard, and fortunately, it was short-lived with few injuries.

NYCHA took stock of its buildings immediately afterwards. We dispatched teams of engineers to check each and every one of the 2,600 buildings for damage. The only structure that appeared to be affected was a chimney at the Red Hook East development. Several bricks fell, but no one was injured. Staff first blocked access and egress to the front entrance on 8 Dwight Street, until we were sure it was safe. An emergency scaffold was put in place and engineers examined the structure to begin making repairs. The initial damage caused by the earthquake was repaired; however the existing conditions of the building facade masonry and

roof top structures required additional safety measure, such as extending the sidewalk shedding, which NYCHA has implemented.

Large Scale Outages

Certainly, there can be months and weeks and days to anticipate the potential damage and danger of a Coastal Storm or hurricane and to plan accordingly. But there are other large-scale emergencies that impact hundreds of NYCHA residents, sometimes in multiple buildings, that are unforeseen. NYCHA's ESD is ready to respond to these events, as well, with an "all hands on deck approach," as we saw in August in Hamilton Heights just before Hurricane Irene.

On Friday, August 12, 2011, at approximately 1:40 PM, a City water main ruptured at the intersection of 152nd Street and Saint Nicholas Avenue. The water main rupture flooded the low pressure gas distribution system with over 30,000 gallons of water. The flooding caused Con Edison to shut down low pressure gas service to 8,214 customers in the Hamilton Heights and Upper Harlem sections of Manhattan, including three NYCHA properties with a total of 2,714 apartments: Rangel Houses, the Polo Grounds Towers and Harlem River II Houses.

NYCHA, with the assistance of Con Edison, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, the Fire Department of New York City, the New York City Police Department, the New York City Department of Transportation, OEM and local elected officials, was able to make initial entries into the area to shut down gas service to the buildings and apartments. Staff from throughout NYCHA

were mobilized and rushed equipment and materials to the site. We notified residents of the disruption in service while also distributing hot plates.

NYCHA also delineated the extent of the impact, established a unified command structure through its Incident Command System to manage the response, and disconnected stoves, changed appliance valves and capped the gas line in each apartment.

This massive mobilization of 380 staff members from 10 different departments led to hot water being restored to all three developments within 24-hours; and 90 percent of all residents also had hot plates in the same 24-hour period. All gas service was restored within 3 weeks, which was much earlier than many surrounding private buildings.

Of notable assistance in this crisis was a significant change NYCHA made this year to Operations, when it added its 150-member Social Services Unit to this department. Thus, they have become additional partners in our emergency responses. They helped identify special needs residents in the Hamilton Heights outage, as well as our Hurricane Irene efforts and these residents received additional assistance. They are there to provide emotional first aid needed to begin stabilizing the household(s) and aligning the necessary support systems in place aimed at nurturing an improved quality of life for the impacted families. Social Services is a key part of our coordinated and immediate community response for both staff and residents impacted by a traumatic event. With gas outages, it's important that we gain entry to each and every apartment before we can fix and restore gas service for all.

While we are proud of this effort and it shows NYCHA's capacity to mobilize quickly and expansively to respond to an emergency impacting our residents, there is still much to do.

Progress in Restoring Gas Service

As for smaller-scale gas outages, NYCHA successfully negotiated an emergency notification process when at least 9 apartments are affected, which allows us to start work after confirmation from the Department of Buildings that they received our notification (they issue us an EN number). We typically file the notification upon completion of the asbestos work. We are still required to file for the appropriate permit but we can at least begin repair work during the permitting process instead of having to wait for the permit. In addition, we recently piloted e-filing for the permits, which should help to reduce the time to test, repair and restore services.

Summary

NYCHA realizes that there is more that can be done to improve and enhance our emergency capabilities, and we work on these procedures every day. We also know that we have the staff, the commitment and the experience to be at the top of our game when faced with any crisis. We stand ready, 'round-the-clock' to keep

our residents safe and to provide maintenance and repairs sufficient for the security of their environment.