



THE CITY OF NEW YORK MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD 3

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Gigi Li, Board Chair

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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING

January 17, 2013

Re: Emergency Planning and Management During and After the Storm – NYCHA Emergency Planning and Response

Good afternoon. My name is Gigi Li, chair of Manhattan's Community Board 3 (CB 3), and I am here to testify on the challenges that NYCHA residents within Community Board 3 faced during and after Superstorm Sandy. I want to begin by thanking Chair Mendez for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to testify.

Background

CB 3 stretches from the Brooklyn Bridge to 14th St on Manhattan's east side, and includes the neighborhoods of Chinatown and the Lower East Side. A substantial portion of Community Board 3 was identified to be in Zone A, particularly the stretch of NYCHA developments along the East River. After Community Board 11 in East Harlem, CB3 has the second highest number of NYCHA households in Manhattan, at just over 13,300. It appears that at least 90% of these units are in zones A and B.

First and foremost, I want to thank all of the elected officials and volunteers who stepped up to assist our community before, during, and after Sandy. It is my hope that we can learn from Sandy and adopt new policies that are not only preventive, but also increase the efficiency and speed of disaster relief to NYCHA residents in times of need.

To that end, I would like to highlight several points:

- **Need for Spanish and Chinese interpretation and translation:** Over 80% of CB 3's NYCHA residents identify as Puerto Rican, other Latino, or Asian. There is a clear need for all information from NYCHA to be in 3 languages, English, Chinese, and Spanish. Before the storm arrived, I volunteered as a door knocker at Smith Houses, encouraging families to evacuate in teams with trilingual language capacity. It became apparent very quickly that non-English speakers were less informed. Chinese interpretation occurred because volunteers from the community worked with local elected officials and their staff to cover limited high need areas. How is a non-English speaker supposed to know how to prepare and eat an MRE, or that eating 4 days of MREs in a row will result in severe constipation? Trilingual access to translation materials and during delivery of services is essential. In CB 3, there is also a good chance that your neighbor doesn't speak English.

- **Support for homebound, medically fragile, and individuals with disabilities:** With elevators not functioning, a significant number of medically fragile and wheelchair bound individuals were trapped inside their own home. I would suggest developing a “buddy system” within each building. As neighbors know each other best, residents can check-in on each other. Wheelchairs need to be charged, prescriptions need to be refilled - these are life threatening situations.
- **Coordination of relief efforts:** The first two days after the storm, there was no information. When assistance finally arrived, it was unorganized. There was a lack of information as to where residents could get help, and no cohesion among the volunteers and City, State, and Federal agencies offering assistance. A standard location and time should be identified as a meeting location within each development to ensure timely and efficient delivery of information, food, and supplies. Community Boards, which are City agencies, received no information before, during, or after the storm. There was no information relayed to us to be able update and inform our constituents as well as no way for us to make inquiries. Our Board was instrumental in coordinating volunteers and local information—but sorely lacked information to keep our constituents informed.

Developments with tenant associations fared much better than those without. Making sure that each development has a robust tenant association is step 1 to emergency planning and response. Emergency preparedness is a team sport, and success requires communication, coordination, and leadership. NYCHA needs to step up to the plate and lead.