

**TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA'S EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESIDENT SERVICES
UKAH BUSGITH
RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2022 – 1:00 PM
COMMITTEE ROOM, CITY HALL, NEW YORK, NY**

Chair Alexa Avilés, members of the Committee on Public Housing, other distinguished members of the City Council, NYCHA residents, community advocates, and members of the public: good afternoon. I am Ukah Busgith, NYCHA's Executive Vice President for Resident Services, Partnerships & Initiatives. I am pleased to be joined by DaVida Rowley-Blackman, Senior Director of Resident Participation & Civic Engagement; Brian Honan, Senior Vice President for Intergovernmental Affairs; and Simon Kawitzky, Vice President of Portfolio Planning. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss our robust efforts to engage and partner with NYCHA residents as we build stronger communities together.

Resident Partnership Is Key to Our Success

We understand that partnership with our stakeholders is fundamental to improving the quality of life in NYCHA communities. In particular, we know that resident engagement and outreach is key to our success. Our Resident Services, Partnerships, and Initiatives (RSPI) department is solely dedicated to this work – every day, its more than 250 passionate staff connect NYCHA residents to critical and empowering programs and services while also engaging them on agency and community priorities. RSPI also supports the extensive network of resident associations and manages partnerships, programs, and initiatives involving economic opportunity as well as youth, senior, and social services.

Beyond RSPI, resident engagement and outreach is woven into the fabric of our work, whether it's communicating about repairs, the new capital and preservation programs that will fully rehabilitate and upgrade residents' homes, or the latest sustainability measures we're implementing. To keep residents informed, last year alone we published over 460 articles on our websites, drafted dozens of resident-wide emails and letters, released 45 videos, translated over 2,700 documents, fulfilled over 400 interpretation requests, posted over 3,600 items on social media, and regularly distributed robocalls to nearly 320,000 phone numbers. That same year, our Customer Contact Center (CCC) handled nearly 2 million calls. Every time there is a relevant service outage, we post flyers at developments and disseminate robocalls to residents. Our monthly rent inserts provide information by mail to 105,000 households and to over 58,000 households online. Our direct mailings reach more than 162,000 households. All of the vital

information we disseminate is available in the covered languages of English, Spanish, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, and Russian, and we provide interpretation services as necessary. Oftentimes, we conduct direct outreach to residents on important topics through door-knocking. We meet with and speak with resident leaders on a very regular basis, and we offer opportunities for residents to get involved through platforms such as resident associations and the Resident Roundtable.

Transforming NYCHA & Supporting Residents

To ensure that RSPI is successful in its work to empower residents and have their voices heard, we recently restructured the department, in line with our overall efforts to transform NYCHA's organization and operations. We also aligned RSPI with our new Neighborhood Model for operations, streamlining the communication involved in supporting residents. RSPI's partnership-based service coordination model involves more than 150 community-based partners. Formerly known as Community Engagement & Partnerships, RSPI supports residents, partners, and the Authority through the following sub-departments:

- Resident Participation & Civic Engagement focuses primarily on coordination and partnership with resident associations, but also on outreach to all residents on the policies and initiatives that impact their lives.
- Resident Outreach Services focuses on engagement with residents surrounding NYCHA's preservation, rehabilitation, and modernization programs to educate about the impacts of these programs on specific developments.
- Resident Relocation Services helps move families to temporary hospitality units or hotels to facilitate repairs in their apartments. It reaches out directly to impacted families and develops relocation plans, considering residents' special needs, preferences, and any services needed.
- Resident Economic Empowerment & Sustainability (REES) supports residents involved in employment and advancement programs, business development, adult education and training, and financial literacy and asset building.
- Resident Health Initiatives manages partnerships and leads interagency efforts to connect residents to preventive health resources, create healthier indoor environments, and cultivate resident leadership in health.
- Family Partnerships connects residents to critical youth, senior, and social services from external providers and City agencies.

- The Office of Public Private/Partnerships builds collaborations with the private, public, and philanthropic sectors to support NYCHA's goals of preserving public housing and improving resident access to community-based services and opportunities.

Strengthening Partnerships, Engagement, & Outreach

We cannot transform NYCHA without input from residents and other stakeholders. There are several organizations that facilitate partnership and resident engagement, and I'll explain a few of them now.

Resident Associations

Resident associations, composed of elected members, are a critical avenue for residents to support each other through events and connections to resources; they also enable residents to collaborate with NYCHA staff at every level, ensuring that they are part of the decision-making process at developments and across the Authority. Over the past few years, we have made sure that resident associations have a place to meet, and we implemented a series of election reforms in partnership with the resident associations to increase resident participation. That includes virtual voting, more open voting, and regular civic engagement events. I'm pleased to report that 249 resident association elections have been held across the city since 2020; currently, a total of 249 NYCHA developments have resident associations.

To build strong and productive relationships, property managers are expected to meet monthly with resident association leadership. In fact, our Neighborhood Model facilitates enhanced coordination between resident associations and property management staff. Resident associations also work closely with their property managers to review and inform priorities within the local property-based budgets.

Tenant Participation Funds

Our work with resident associations also involves the distribution and management of tenant participation funds. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides tenant participation funds to support the work of resident associations in strengthening and supporting their communities – for instance, for educational classes and workshops, information dissemination and resource fairs, development clean-up days, and resident association office supplies. We implemented several reforms to improve the process for disbursing the funds. For example, we:

- Updated the written agreement between NYCHA and resident associations on the use of the funds, based on comments from resident leaders and advocates;
- Revised the plain language guidebook that explains the funding process (it's available on our website);
- Streamlined the process for spending funds by introducing a commercial card that resident associations can use to make approved purchases up to \$5,000;
- Created online tip sheets to help resident associations make the best use of the funds; and
- Increased transparency by posting online quarterly budget reports that list the funds spent and still available by development.

We know the transition to this new system of funding was a difficult adjustment for some associations. Of course, we are open to incorporating additional feedback from residents and other stakeholders on how to improve the tenant participation funds process.

Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP) & the Resident Advisory Board (RAB)

Every president of a recognized resident association is a member of the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP), which is organized into 10 districts; resident association presidents elect a Committee Board to represent their district and the CCOP Executive Board. The CCOP works with NYCHA leadership to address quality of life issues at NYCHA developments, advise on operations, and engage with government at all levels to advance the interests of NYCHA residents. Members of the DCOP and CCOP Executive Board automatically become members of the Resident Advisory Board (RAB), which primarily provides recommendations for NYCHA's annual and five-year agency plans.

To further our partnerships, last year NYCHA and the CCOP signed a new Memorandum of Agreement that officially recognizes the CCOP as the Authority-wide voice for residents and formalizes its role in advising on all areas of NYCHA's portfolio. Specifically, the agreement establishes a framework for how NYCHA and the CCOP will work together to enhance the Authority's operations and management, amplify resident participation, and better address the issues that are most important to residents. The agreement also outlines how NYCHA and the CCOP will share information and communicate as we jointly reimagine NYCHA's future.

I would like to acknowledge all the CCOP members, including CCOP Chair Daniel Barber, for their efforts here. I would also like to note that while the CCOP has long worked with NYCHA on

issues affecting residents, this is the first time NYCHA and the CCOP have had an official agreement since 1993. To further illustrate the progress we're making, NYCHA and the CCOP used to meet twice a year – we are now meeting with the CCOP every week.

We have begun a new HUD-funded training program for resident leaders and employees on this new agreement, as well as the federal “Part 964” regulations, which govern resident participation in all aspects of the Authority’s mission and operation. Our goal is to train residents and employees side by side so they learn together and jointly understand the expectations for partnership that are shared by NYCHA and CCOP executive leadership.

Resident Roundtable

Launched last year, the Resident Roundtable provides an opportunity for residents to help design the implementation of NYCHA’s Transformation Plan. Its more than 30 members represent each of the Authority’s Neighborhood portfolios as well as Section 8 voucher holders in PACT developments; they provide valuable feedback and recommendations on matters such as lease enforcement, residents’ quality of life, safety and security, communication between residents and NYCHA, and other areas identified by residents and staff.

Outreach on a Range of Initiatives

We work intensively to keep residents informed, and solicit their feedback, on key initiatives that include PACT, the NYC Public Housing Preservation Trust, as well as our Sandy recovery work and our capital projects more broadly.

Based on the feedback we hear from residents, community members, and other stakeholders, we make ongoing improvements to ensure that resident expertise and input are at the center of the PACT planning process. Resident leaders now participate in selecting the developers, general contractors, property managers, and social service providers who will renovate and maintain their developments; they review proposals, interview development teams, and help us select the partners that are best suited to serve their community. The PACT Resource Team pairs residents with trusted, third-party advisors and consultants to support these efforts. To engage and inform residents about PACT, we host meetings and info sessions that feature live interpretation, and we provide printed materials, videos, and online resources that are available in multiple languages. Residents also have access to a dedicated PACT hotline to ask questions and discuss concerns.

Our engagement on the Trust, which was authorized this summer by the State, involves regular town halls where residents can get their questions answered. We have also provided a suite of materials explaining how the Trust works, including how it will bring billions of dollars of comprehensive renovations to NYCHA developments while maintaining residents' rights and a public workforce and keeping our properties 100 percent public. Residents will also be part of the process for selecting vendors to perform the rehabilitation work and can serve on committees that check the quality of this work. Residents will be able to choose whether or not to include their developments in the Trust; we recently presented for public comment the draft Trust resident opt-in voting procedures, which were developed in collaboration with resident leaders and policy advocates.

These are just some examples of how we engage with our residents on major policy, capital, or operational initiatives.

Moving Forward Together

We are grateful for your support as we work to engage NYCHA residents and improve their quality of life. We are committed to comprehensive communication with residents, and we strive to incorporate resident voices, ideas, and perspectives in our work.

We look forward to renewed partnerships with residents and other stakeholders, including members of the Council, as we continue to make progress together.

Thank you; we are happy to answer any questions you may have.