

TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA GENERAL MANAGER CECIL HOUSE
NYCHA'S PLANNING AND RESPONSE FOR SUPERSTORM SANDY
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 (NYCHA) preparation for, response to, and continuing recovery from Hurricane Sandy. I am Cecil House, General Manager of the New York City Housing Authority. Joining me this afternoon are Carlos Laboy-Diaz, NYCHA's Executive Vice President for Operations, and Raymond Ribeiro, Executive Vice President for Capital Projects.

As the members of this Committee well know, the New York City Housing Authority serves over 600,000 New Yorkers in neighborhoods across the City, many of which are in vulnerable, low-lying areas in proximity to the rivers, bays and oceans that surround our city. Twenty-six (26) NYCHA developments – home to over 45,000 residents –are in the City-designated Flood Zone A, however 80,000 NYCHA residents were directly impacted by the storm. In the months since Hurricane Sandy hit, many have noted the unlikely convergence of exceptional circumstances that Hurricane Sandy presented – and, indeed, the devastation that resulted across the City and in NYCHA developments. The days and weeks after Hurricane Sandy were no doubt a trying time for thousands of NYCHA residents. NYCHA addressed the storm's devastation systematically, according to an established emergency plan, and met unexpected challenges with flexibility and innovation. We believe the actions we took brought back essential services to NYCHA residents as quickly as possible given the unprecedented challenges we faced.

Collaborating purposefully with a host of partners at all levels of government, in the private and non-profit sectors, and within local communities, NYCHA staff worked around the clock, surpassing the efforts of most other landlords in these communities – restoring services, making repairs, and connecting residents to resources and supplies. We received constant support from Mayor Bloomberg, as well as Deputy Mayors Steel, Holloway, and Gibbs, and we are grateful for the work of elected officials like

Chairwoman Mendez and other members of the Council. In many cases, these public servants and their staffs climbed stairs, knocked on doors, distributed meals, provided language services, and took on other tasks, alongside the NYCHA staff members and community volunteers who worked around the clock during this time of need to serve the families in public housing.

Today, I will give you an overview of our efforts to prepare for the Hurricane and to respond to its unprecedented devastation and our ongoing recovery efforts.

A Record of Preparedness

NYCHA's storm awareness and preparedness efforts far predate Hurricane Sandy, and even Hurricane Irene, which hit New York in August 2011. NYCHA has had a hurricane procedure since September 1964, has exercised that procedure as necessary and has updated it regularly, most recently in 2012.

Supporting the Bloomberg Administration's focus on mitigating the effects of climate change, NYCHA employees began to systematically engage residents and staff from developments in low-lying neighborhoods. Realizing that we could begin to see bigger, more frequent storms, we urged these residents to partner with us by participating in education efforts. Eight months before Hurricane Irene, we initiated an emergency preparedness program under the leadership of NYCHA Commissioner Margarita Lopez. Over 800 residents and 150 NYCHA employees participated in this program. The program was focused on the Far Rockaways, given their unique vulnerability to coastal storms and remoteness from the rest of the City. We engaged all residents, including seniors, the mobility-impaired, and residents depending on life-sustaining equipment. During this outreach effort, we emphasized that residents should evacuate well before the storm hit if they could, and not wait until transportation was provided by NYCHA or any other governmental entity. We noted that evacuation was important not simply because of flooding, but also because of the possibility of prolonged electrical, heat, or hot water outages.

In the lead-up to Sandy, we implemented many measures based on lessons learned from Irene. These measures included having a broader base of NYCHA Departments at our Emergency Operations Center; developing pre-approved templates for flyers and other communications in various languages to facilitate sharing evacuation information; establishing pre-determined fallback sites for evacuated staff; more effectively coordinate our pre- and post-storm transportation and evacuation efforts with DOE, the MTA, NYPD, and other partners; and de-energizing elevators and other critical equipment in advance of the storm's impact. In 2011, many people – including residents – considered taking the elevators off-line extreme. We now know that doing so significantly enhanced our recovery efforts.

Initial Outreach

NYCHA's communication with OEM began as early as Tuesday, October 23rd, and continued until OEM's situation room closed. NYCHA was one of the first to staff a desk at OEM and one of the last to depart on November 30th. On Thursday, October 25th, the City activated its Coastal Storm Plan. NYCHA immediately began to implement its Hurricane preparedness procedures. We activated our Emergency Operations Center on Friday and it remained staffed around the clock throughout our response. NYCHA's Chairman, John Rhea, was at OEM, and was actively engaged in daily briefings with the Mayor, Deputy Mayors, and fellow agency heads, along with myself and other senior staff. When the Mayor issued his voluntary evacuation order, we launched a multifaceted outreach campaign to NYCHA residents and other partners that lasted throughout the weekend and until Sandy hit land.

While our outreach efforts included all NYCHA residents in Zone A, we prioritized outreach to the almost 3,300 residents in those areas who are mobility impaired and the 140 who depend on life-sustaining equipment. This process is a completely voluntary process. These individuals have identified themselves to us through our Annual Review process as potentially needing special assistance. As NYCHA is not permitted to require residents to identify any special needs, there may have been others potentially in this category. Using our database of contact information for these residents, NYCHA

employees knocked on each of their doors over the weekend, as well as the doors of seniors in Zone A. We offered these residents special transportation options for evacuation, and reminded those who insisted on sheltering-in-place to have food, water, and other important supplies. We also deployed an additional round of direct calls to the residents who use life-sustaining equipment, encouraging them to evacuate – we noted that flooding was not the only peril of the storm, that prolonged electrical or heat outages were also possible.

We began our broader outreach by contacting Resident Association Leaders for the developments in Zone A flood areas. NYCHA Board Members led a team of NYCHA employees to hold meetings with local elected officials and resident leaders. Over the weekend, we deployed three rounds of automated calls – 33,000 in total – in order to reach each of the 19,000 families in Zone A. We also posted multi-language flyers in building lobbies, hallways, and elevators and posted messages on our website. We also coordinated with City Hall to broadly spread the same information through OEM contacts, 311 and various social media outlets, including Facebook and Twitter.

On Sunday, the 28th, we redoubled our efforts, as the Mayor changed the City's evacuation order from voluntary to mandatory. By this time, we had deployed 3,900 employees on the ground, 1,700 more staff than would usually be deployed on a Sunday. We made more calls to resident and we knocked on more resident doors. We coordinated with the NYPD, who made announcements over loud speakers in most developments, reaching thousands more residents. We coordinated with elected officials and the Mayor's staff to reach even more residents. We also partnered with the Department of Education to provide more buses for evacuation. And finally, despite the Sunday evacuation deadline, as an added measure, we worked with the NYPD Housing Bureau Chief Joanne Jaffe to make additional buses available through Monday. Our employees worked to make residents aware of this final evacuation option until 2:30pm that day, six hours before the worst of the storm. At this point, the last willing residents evacuated vulnerable developments, along with any remaining NYCHA staff.

Despite sustained outreach from NYCHA, the work of the Mayor and his staff at City Hall, the efforts of local elected officials, the encouragement of the NYPD and various other City agencies, many residents chose not to evacuate.

Systems and Operational Preparedness

While conducting this broad engagement effort, NYCHA also moved proactively to secure and prepare our buildings, construction sites, and critical systems in the most vulnerable areas.

While our preparation efforts began before the storm, we started executing this plan on Friday and continued throughout the weekend. In Zone A developments, we removed 397 elevators from service in 201 buildings, positioning them on upper floors. We de-energized other related relevant equipment. Where we could, we turned off the boilers and related equipment. These steps were taken not only to protect equipment from flooding, but also to ensure that it could readily be restored after the storm. Our employees checked for debris on the grounds and roofs of our 2,600 buildings. They also make sure that hundreds of drains were cleaned and clear of potential blockage. We moved NYCHA vehicles from Zone A developments to safer areas. We secured 55 construction sites. And finally, we inspected over 22 miles of sidewalk shedding to ensure their continued safety.

With as many residents evacuated as possible, with the developments secure, and with our staff evacuated from Zone A, we turned to our planned response to the impending storm. We recognized the need for teams on the ground immediately following the storm. Over 1800 employees volunteered to spend Monday night at nearby developments, despite their responsibilities to their own families during this trying time.

Impact and Service Restoration

Sandy reached the City on the evening of Monday, October 29th, causing massive damage. Not one of our buildings collapsed or sustained material structural damage due to the storm.

However, as we now know, the storm's reach was much wider than Zone A, affecting developments in Zone B and beyond. We discovered after an immediate review that over 400 buildings in Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan, housing roughly 80,000 residents, were affected significantly by Sandy. Of those 423 buildings, 402 lost power – and with it, elevator and compactor service. 386 buildings lost heat and hot water.

When combined with the storm's impact to the infrastructure of Con Ed and LIPA, the storm's impacts to NYCHA facilities in the Rockaways, Coney Island, and Red Hook, was especially severe. In Coney Island, 42 buildings – home to 8,882 residents – were impacted. In the Rockaways, 60 buildings – home to 10,100 residents – were impacted, and in Red Hook, 32 buildings – home to 6,173 residents – were impacted. It should be noted that the recovery in Coney Island was especially difficult because those buildings sustained substantial sand and saltwater infiltration. The systems damage in other communities was due mostly to flooding. In addition, electricity was down at our headquarters offices in Lower Manhattan. Due to good planning, our emergency operations center was located in Long Island City.

Given our primary mission as a landlord, we focused on assessing the damage to our buildings and building systems and determining what was needed to restore services to our residents. On Tuesday, October 30th, NYCHA began the structural, mechanical, and electrical assessment process. Over three days, an average of 150 employees determined whether each building was structurally sound, and confirmed the extent of any damage. The assessments began with all developments with known outages and flooding and ultimately extended to all of our buildings.

We found sand piled against basements doors up to 4 feet high, basement flooded with salt water, in some cases up to 20 feet deep, boilers and electrical panels completely submerged in corrosive salt water, 30 foot long external trash compactor lifted and placed into new locations. Hundreds of trees uprooted and lying on their side. Thousands of broken branches beside them. Vehicles piled in corners in parking lots. And in the evening, complete darkness.

It was immediately clear, that in order to restore electrical power, heat, and hot water to these buildings, we needed to de-water millions of cubic feet of space. We immediately began to pump tens of millions of gallons of water from electric meters room, gas meter rooms, boiler rooms, hot water tank rooms, storage rooms, elevator pits, vaults, trades shops, maintenance areas, locker rooms, lunch rooms, bathrooms, compactor rooms and other basement spaces. We used hundreds of pumps of various capacities. In some cases, we completely emptied a room of water and readied it for electrical or boiler work, only to return later and find the room full of water again. Ultimately, we supplemented our pumping capability with equipment and manpower from our heroes in Onondaga County, NY, and emergency contractors, Army Corps of Engineers and the Navy.

[IMAGES]

While we were pumping water, we were working to secure temporary boilers and generators, focusing locally first then extending our search to more distant locations. We also had to ensure that the mobile boiler would work with NYCHA's infrastructure: low pressure vs. high pressure or be appropriately sized – the right horsepower. In the end, we utilized 24 temporary boilers (both high and low pressure) and approximately 100 generators – to restore heat and electricity to NYCHA facilities. We worked with a range of partners to secure this equipment, including OEM, the Army Corps of Engineers, HUD, FEMA, the National Guard, LIPA and private companies. The generators came from around the country and the mobile boilers came from Texas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Ohio, Tennessee, Georgia, and Virginia. Due to permitting issues, weight restrictions, and trouble navigating the recently devastated Tri-State Area, the deliveries faced numerous obstacles.

Even before the boilers arrived, we deployed numerous electricians, plumbers, welders, and steamfitters to install the necessary connections to the buildings: the steam lines to the headers, electric lines, gas lines, oil lines, feedwater lines, all to shorten the installation time, basically building an outside boiler room. Once the boilers arrived, the installation process was much quicker.

Thanks to these persistent, around-the-clock efforts, we had restored heat, hot water, and electricity to 44,000 affected residents by November 7th, the end of the first week after the storm, and 65,000 by November 14th, the end of the second week. By November 18th, before many other landlords in the City, electrical, heat and hot water services were restored to all NYCHA buildings. Driving through the Rockaways one night on Rockaway Beach Boulevard, I looked back at our developments and it hit me, the only light I saw was the light coming from Hammel Houses.

I must acknowledge the work of our NYCHA employees, our City, state and federal colleagues, and our contractors for making this happen.

Post-Storm Outreach and Partnerships

This sense of dedication and common purpose also fueled our post-storm resident outreach efforts, which were occurring at the same time as the service restorations I've described. We knew, drawing on our past experience with Irene, that this would require a collaborative effort with a wide range of partners from the public, private, and non-profit sectors, not to mention the informal neighbor-to-neighbor bonds that have always made our communities strong. Beginning on Tuesday evening, October 30th, Chairman Rhea, together with City Hall and our fellow City agencies, began to roll-out plans to provide critical services to residents who had decided to shelter in place. At the same time, Vice Chair Emily Youssouf played an instrumental role in coordinating resource efforts with FEMA and other partners. She together with Board Member Lopez and Board Member Victor Gonzalez also led multiple briefings with NYCHA resident

leaders. Additionally, NYCHA employees convened a series of post-storm conference calls with local elected officials.

We continued our robust outreach effort to residents with special needs, during the two days immediately following the storm and periodically thereafter. Additionally, we posted security guards at our senior developments that had lost power.

On the ground, staff coordinated and organized our collaborations with a range of partners and volunteers. Through these efforts, and in concert with many local elected officials, we began distributing food and water to residents on Thursday, November 1st. Collaborators in this effort included Bed, Bath and Beyond, Target, Walmart, New York Cares, GOYA, Jet Blue, Red Hook Initiative, Fairway, Robin Hood, Shake Shack, and others.

Critical to this effort was our coordination of several large-scale door-knocking campaigns in Coney Island, the Rockaways, and the Red Hook area, sending teams of NYCHA staff from across the Authority – along with partners from the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, Medical Mobile Vans, Community Solutions, East River Development Alliance, and home aide and health attendant agencies – to distribute food, water, and blankets, and connect residents to critical health services.

NYCHA also opened our facilities to respond to immediate community needs, opening community centers to house a displaced school, warming centers, medical clinics, and distribution sites for food and water. On the Lower East Side, along with a host of elected officials, and the Legal Aid Society, we set up legal clinics at Rutgers Houses and Campos Plaza to help residents secure FEMA aid.

The engagement of members of this body were especially helpful:

Speaker Quinn and her office – along with Congresswoman Nydia Velasquez and State Senator Velmanette Montgomery – helped to connect us with community groups, especially in Red Hook, that coordinated efforts more swiftly than government is often

able to. Chairwoman Mendez lent NYCHA several capable members of her staff and was tireless in her efforts on behalf of residents with special needs on the Lower East Side. Councilmember Margaret Chin and her staff canvassed Smith Houses and other developments to ensure that residents were safe. Councilmember Dominic Recchia was instrumental in helping us secure access to doctors, ambulances, and other resources. Councilmember Steve Levin and his staff worked practically full-time out of Gowanus Houses after the storm to distribute meals and clothing, staying in constant contact with both residents and NYCHA staff. Councilmember Sara Gonzalez personally knocked on doors in the developments in her district after the storm to check in on residents. Assembly Member Felix Ortiz organized an extensive health clinic at the Miccio Center. These are just examples of their contributions.

Moving Forward

We know that despite this work and partnership, Sandy's aftermath will be with us for a long time to come. Having restored critical services and power, NYCHA has set about inspecting, cleaning, and remediating individual apartments and public spaces such as community centers and offices. We have also knocked on the doors of nearly 24,000 apartments to check for Sandy-related mold. We did not locate significant Sandy-related mold, however, where we encountered any mold conditions, we removed it. Even where the mold conditions were the result of housekeeping issues, we removed it. We are continuing our in-depth assessment of those apartments and public areas directly affected by storm waters. We are especially committed to working with residents displaced by the storm to identify temporary housing solutions while their apartments are cleaned and repaired. In some cases, we have offered a temporary or permanent transfer to residents in impacted apartments. NYCHA's staff is providing crucial support services as part of our work to coordinate relocations for residents.

Our Board approved and has begun over \$5 million in rent abatements to residents in households in impacted areas who lost electrical, hot water, heat, and elevator services. For every day without any of those services, residents received a full credit. We also

aggressively pursued and won a \$7.3 million grant from the U.S. Labor Department to hire close to 400 temporary workers from affected communities assist with our outreach and cleanup efforts. Additionally, vendors contracted to clean and rehabilitate common spaces have hired an estimated 200 NYCHA residents.

NYCHA has begun a large-scale assessment of our infrastructure to determine the full cost of the storm to NYCHA – and, more importantly, to make decisions about how, in light of New York City’s growing vulnerability to tropical storms and other extreme weather events, we can more strategically procure, locate, and protect important equipment.

We have also increased our communication to residents in affected communities, based on feedback we have received. We know that there is much room for improvement in this area, and will continue to assess and make adjustments.

We know, however, that there is much more that needs to be done. We can only be successful with the help of partners from across the city, state, and country, including our friends in the City Council. We continue to work with Washington, Albany, and City Hall to obtain funding to address our most pressing challenges, and have worked with many members of this body on behalf of affected New Yorkers. We began 2012 by releasing *Plan NYCHA*, highlighting the need for citizens from every walk of life to invest in preserving the great promise of public housing – that need has never been more evident than it is today. We are confident that with the continued benefit of your ideas and assistance we can go forward and finish the work that remains.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.