

TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA CHAIR & CEO GREGORY RUSS
TENANT SAFETY AND BUILDING SANITATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING WITH THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND BUILDINGS
MONDAY, JUNE 29, 2020 – 1:00 PM
REMOTE HEARING (VIRTUAL ROOM 1)

Chairs Alicka Ampry-Samuel and Robert Cornegy Jr., members of the Committees on Public Housing and Housing and Buildings, other distinguished members of the City Council, NYCHA residents, and members of the public: good afternoon. I am Greg Russ, NYCHA's Chair and CEO. I am pleased to be joined virtually by General Manager & Chief Operating Officer Vito Mustaciuolo, Chief Compliance Officer Daniel Greene, and Executive Vice President for Community Engagement and Partnerships Sideya Sherman. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss NYCHA's efforts to ensure the health and safety of our residents and employees amidst this global pandemic, which remains our top priority.

First, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge all of our incredibly hardworking staff who are serving residents during this crisis – from the teams fixing boilers and elevators; to the caretakers keeping our buildings clean; to the staff behind the scenes who are reaching out to residents, procuring and distributing essential supplies and materials, and processing rent reductions. I'd also like to thank our resident leaders and community-based partners who are helping to distribute food and face coverings to those in need.

This is truly a challenging time in our history, and we are all engaged in the critically important work of taking care of our community. The coronavirus has affected all of us; it has significantly impacted our way of life and brought into sharp relief issues and inequities across the globe, including those related to health, economics, and connectivity. As a nation, as a city, and here at NYCHA, we have been presented an extraordinary challenge that we must overcome together.

Communicating with Our Stakeholders

The COVID-19 crisis underscores the importance of timely and accurate communication. At the outset, our first priority was to make sure that residents understood what we were up against and how they could take steps to protect themselves. So we began communicating early, even before we fully realized the devastating impacts of the coronavirus.

Since day one, we have been working nonstop to amplify the guidance from partners like the City of New York and the City's Health Department, to inform our residents and employees of the best health and safety practices to follow during the pandemic. As of June 25, we have delivered approximately 2.35 million COVID-19-related communications via phone calls, robocalls, and emails to residents and resident leaders, Section 8 residents, employees, elected officials, and advocates. To our social media reach of approximately 27 million, we posted about COVID-19 around 800 times between March 1, 2020, and June 25 on all our social media channels. We dedicated a page on our website to COVID-19 resources, and we've also posted important information and updates on *The NYCHA Journal*, our digital newspaper for residents. The COVID-19 safety posters we put up at all of our more than 2,200 buildings provide information in five languages, and other informational notices we distributed are available in 13 languages.

The hardworking staff from our Community Engagement and Partnerships department have made over 100,000 "wellness check" phone calls, resulting in nearly 60,000 personal conversations with our most vulnerable residents, including seniors, to make sure that they understand how they can stay safe, determine whether they have any special needs at this time, and connect them to resources from our partners. We recently partnered with the New York Cares volunteer organization to provide seniors a "buddy" who will make routine calls to those requesting ongoing checks by phone.

We are sending a newsletter to more than 230 resident association leaders three to five days a week to keep them informed about COVID-19, our efforts, and key NYCHA and City resources. We speak with the Chair of the Citywide Council of Presidents almost daily by phone, and with other resident leaders about two to three times per week,

representing over 9,500 calls since the start of the pandemic. We also hosted four Resident Advisory Board meetings and a Resident Leader Town Hall with senior NYCHA and City leadership to discuss COVID-19.

And we are providing elected officials with regular updates. NYCHA's Intergovernmental Relations team has held 219 external meetings to date to brief elected officials, their staff, and other community partners on the Authority's COVID-19 response and needs, and to respond to inquiries in real time. We have also co-hosted 11 tele-town hall events to provide updates and guidance to thousands of participants. And we are conducting informational webinars for advocates and addressing industry groups at their forums.

We will continue to keep all our stakeholders, including residents, informed as the guidance from experts like the CDC and NYC Health Department evolves.

Taking Action Early

NYCHA began taking precautions and proactive measures to protect our residents back in February, before there was even a confirmed case of COVID-19 in New York. We hired vendors and developed schedules to sanitize buildings – we started disinfecting senior buildings on March 11 and family buildings on March 13. We are sanitizing senior buildings five times a week and sanitizing family buildings three times per week. The focus is on high-touch, high-traffic areas, such as lobby and common area doors; mailboxes; stairway doors, handles, and handrails; elevators panels; trash chute doors; and other common areas.

The disinfectants the vendors use to sanitize the buildings are on the EPA's official list of disinfectants for use against COVID-19. And staff from our Compliance, Quality Assurance (QA), and Environmental Health and Safety departments are working tirelessly in the field and via remote monitoring to make sure that the required protocols are being followed throughout the sanitization process. They have conducted over 4,100 on-site field inspections at nearly 300 developments and conducted more than 4,700

remote surveys of senior development staff, with results reported daily and deficiencies addressed promptly. Resident complaints, which can be submitted through our website or by calling the Customer Contact Center (CCC), are investigated through on-site inspections or direct inquiries to the vendor.

We have made about 180 Section 3 hires as part of the building disinfection work and AC installation I'll discuss later in the testimony, including about 150 NYCHA residents.

To supplement the caretaker staff at our developments – who clean lobbies and common areas, remove waste, and maintain the grounds every day – we hired over 1,000 per diem workers, more than half of whom are residents.

Additionally, we provided face coverings to all employees who work at our developments and to employees who may come into contact with others during the course of their workday. As the guidance from the CDC and Health Department, and government directives, became more stringent during the course of the pandemic, we adapted our policies on face coverings for staff accordingly.

Helping to Alleviate Residents' Financial Burden

We are constantly looking for ways to alleviate the financial burden for households that may be impacted by additional expenses or a loss of income during these difficult and uncertain times. At the very beginning of the crisis, NYCHA suspended resident evictions for as long as the City is under a state of emergency, to help keep our families healthy and housed. In addition, we closed our hearing offices and adjourned all cases before the Housing Court.

We also simplified our Rent Hardship Policy to make it easier for residents to apply. In only a few weeks, we amended a process that was admittedly burdensome for residents to benefit from. Now, with just a few clicks on a computer or by answering a few questions with a CCC rep, residents can request a rent adjustment due to a partial or full loss of income. There is no waiting period to apply, and resident can self-certify their

loss of income. NYCHA rent is always 30 percent of income, so if household income is zero, then the rent is zero. We have received over 15,000 rent hardship requests since March 12.

Connecting Residents to Services and Resources

We are working with City agencies and community partners to connect residents to food, medication, and essential health and social services during this crisis. For instance, NYCHA and the City are working to enroll all eligible residents in GetFoodNYC. We have also instituted bulk food delivery at many of our senior buildings and have hired residents to assist with the delivery process. To date, more than 5 million meals have been delivered to over 80,000 NYCHA households since mid-April. NYCHA has also worked with a variety of partners – including Food Bank for New York City, CLOTH, City Harvest, and others – to help organize pop-up food distribution events and other targeted meal delivery programs. And we are promoting the opportunity for free grab-and-go meals at 400 schools citywide. We would like to thank all of our partners, including members of the Council, for your assistance with these vital efforts.

To help our seniors stay cool and safe at home this summer, Mayor de Blasio committed more than \$6 million and NYCHA committed over \$10 million to provide air conditioners to about 22,000 households.

And the City has provided free tablets and internet service to 10,000 NYCHA seniors to help them stay connected to their friends and family as well as critical online resources.

Lessons Learned

During this extraordinary experience, we have gained some lessons learned that will strengthen our work going forward. For instance, we want to incorporate some of the best practices we applied during the pandemic – such as enhanced cleanings, a transparent cleaning schedule, and related QA inspections – into our regular

maintenance program. We also increased our level of communication with residents and external partners, which always makes for a more productive partnership.

For example, the feedback we received from resident leaders and other stakeholders improved our disinfection process.

Supporting Each Other

The coronavirus has changed all of our lives. But amidst the challenges of this rapidly changing situation, we remain guided by our top priority: the health, safety, and quality of life of our residents. To that end, we will continue to monitor and share (in various languages) the latest information and guidance from our partners and update our policies and procedures as necessary.

On behalf of my colleagues, I would like to thank the Council, Mayor de Blasio, and Governor Cuomo for your support, which is enabling us to address this pandemic and continue to transform the Housing Authority. In addition to supporting the fundamentals of our work as a landlord, our partnership is providing residents with access to testing and other vital resources, such as face coverings and hand sanitizer.

Most of all, we would like to thank the many resident leaders who are putting themselves on the front line of this pandemic. They are organizing food drives and PPE distribution and conducting their own wellness checks of neighbors. Time and time again, NYCHA residents show the world that we are a strong and resilient community which looks out for one another.

Even though this is a time of uncertainty, the one thing that we do know is that we must support each other and work together to help our fellow New Yorkers. We're all in this together, and we'll get through this together.

Thank you. We are happy to answer any questions you may have, and I look forward to our continued collaboration in service to this great city.