

TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA CHAIR & CEO SHOLA OLATOYE
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIGHTING AND SAFETY IN THE WAKE OF THE AKAI
GURLEY SHOOTING
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2014 – 10:00 AM
COUNCIL CHAMBERS, CITY HALL, NEW YORK, NY

Chairman Ritchie Torres, members of the Committee on Public Housing, and other distinguished members of the City Council: good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) efforts to enhance the safety of our developments for NYCHA families. I am Shola Olatoye, NYCHA's Chair and Chief Executive Officer. Joining me today are Brian Clarke, Vice President of Operations; Raymond Ribeiro, Executive Vice President for Capital Projects; and Captain Howard Gottesman of the NYPD's Housing Bureau.

Before I tell you about our work, I want to say that my heart goes out to Akai Gurley's family. As the mother of two boys, I can't imagine anything more devastating than the loss of a child. Akai's death was tragic, and a stark reminder that everyone deserves to feel safe in their homes. NYCHA is no exception. Unfortunately, we have experienced too much heartbreak this year.

The Challenges

This terrible tragedy occurred at Pink Houses, a campus of 22 eight-story buildings housing over 3,600 people in about 1,500 apartments. It has 25 stairwells, about 200 corridors, over 3,400 interior lights, and over 400 exterior lights. In total, NYCHA maintains about 178,000 apartments in 334 developments citywide, with a population similar to Atlanta, Miami, or Minneapolis. Our approximately 2,600 buildings have 4,212 stairwells, about 38,000 corridors, and an estimated 255,000 interior lights and 26,000 exterior lights. For the important work of inspecting, maintaining, and repairing all of this, we have over 2,700 Caretakers and 1,000 Maintenance Workers. Caretakers remove trash, check and clean hallways and stairwells, and maintain the grounds.

Maintenance Workers assist with inspections and maintenance, and make minor repairs.

NYCHA staff work incredibly hard and do their best to keep the developments lit, clean, safe, and resilient; I've seen this personally. And as you can imagine, this is a considerable task. On a typical day, they make about 9,000 repairs. Residents call our Customer Contact Center to have a work order created, or NYCHA development staff create a work order based on something they've observed. Work orders are requests for repair or maintenance that are tracked in NYCHA's computerized system. Depending on the need, they are assigned to a Maintenance Worker or a Skilled Trades worker and are scheduled by either the Customer Contact Center or a borough's Scheduling and Planning Unit. A development's Superintendent assigns staff to repair public spaces. In general, NYCHA creates work orders for major repairs to fixtures or ballasts, but does not generate and track work orders for light bulb replacement. This is usually handled by Caretakers the same day the outage is reported. For issues involving work orders, it takes an average of 4.5 days to repair exterior lights and 8.9 days to repair interior lights. This is down from 40.9 days and 62.3 days, respectively, in 2012. NYCHA has spent about \$1.4 million so far this year on lighting supplies alone. But as you have heard before, a generation of federal disinvestment – a loss of about \$1.16 billion since 2001 to keep our developments functioning – forces NYCHA to continually make tough decisions about how our limited funds are used.

A Terrible Tragedy

There have been a variety of accounts about the conditions at NYCHA and the responsibility of the authorities surrounding the shooting of Akai Gurley. We are cooperating fully with the NYPD's investigation, which is still ongoing. But let me tell you the facts that we do have about the circumstances. We interviewed staff who were present before and after the incident at 2724 Linden Boulevard, one of Pink Houses' 22 buildings. The Caretaker assigned to this building said that when

she left for the day on Thursday, November 20, there weren't any lights out on the seventh or eighth floors. A senior NYCHA official, a Borough Administrator, conducted an inspection on Friday, November 21. He concluded that the light on the eighth floor of stairwell A was out due to an issue with the ballast – only the ends of the two-foot fluorescent bulb were dimly lit.

There were no work orders for these lights. NYCHA has a record of two work orders for other lights in that building: one from November 14 for the fifth floor and one from October 22 for the third floor. Upon inspection that Friday the 21st, it was determined that these lights were working.

A Collaborative Focus on Safety

Since taking office, Mayor de Blasio has devoted unprecedented attention and generous financial support to help NYCHA deal with diminishing federal funding, which accounts for over 97 percent of our government funding. His \$210 million plan to make neighborhoods safer is a long-term, collaborative, and comprehensive approach that involves more law enforcement on the ground, physical improvements, community engagement and outreach, and expanded employment and education programs. We also greatly appreciate Manhattan District Attorney Cy Vance's plan, announced today, to use \$101 million in settlement money to enhance security at select developments.

A key component of the Mayor's initiative is that it brings together many City agencies, including the NYPD, to address crime in our communities. In line with this new way of working collaboratively, NYCHA and the NYPD streamlined the way the NYPD reports issues from the field and how any necessary related repairs are handled by NYCHA. Our NYPD officers on the ground are a vital partner in keeping our developments safe and secure.

Other Progress

The Mayor's financial investment in NYCHA is helping us to continue reducing the number of open work orders, which once totaled a shocking 423,000, and the time it takes to respond to a work order. Currently, there are about 100,000 open work orders and it takes an average of 9.6 days to respond to a maintenance request, down from a peak of 150 days in 2013. Although this progress is important, we know that we must keep working to bring these numbers down. The numbers are starting to rise for a few reasons, including a reduction in overtime and our work to inspect every single apartment over the next two years.

We are also engaged in exterior lighting upgrade projects at 50 developments across the City that will benefit over 100,000 residents. These are being funded by multiple sources, including Hurricane Sandy funds and \$35 million from the Mayor and City Council, thanks to the leadership and generous support of Speaker Mark-Viverito, Committee Chair Torres, and the rest of the Council. This groundbreaking collaboration between the Speaker, City Council, and Mayor is exactly the kind of innovative partnership that will help NYCHA deliver on its mission.

Also, we removed nearly 27,000 feet of sidewalk sheds in 2014. And we are on track to finish installing security camera systems at 49 developments by the end of the year. We've already completed 44 of those multi-camera systems as of this week.

Conclusion

Everyone at NYCHA comes to work each day striving to maintain our developments in a way that is safe and secure and promotes a decent quality of life for residents. We have a number of programs and strategies in place to help us achieve this incredibly important goal, from the Mayor's Action Plan to our Resident Watch to our many productive partnerships with other City agencies and non-profit organizations.

But to make public housing truly safer, we need additional funding. Faced with this reality of shrinking resources and the enormity of the task at hand, we are developing a new strategic investment plan called “NextGeneration NYCHA.” NextGeneration NYCHA changes the way NYCHA operates and is financed to make public housing safer, stronger, and more efficient for residents, for today and tomorrow. We look forward to coming back to talk to you about the plan as it evolves. Of course, it takes everyone working together to bring big ideas like this to life. We appreciate support from the Mayor and the City Council, and hope that our successful collaboration continues. Our efforts to increase transparency – such as the NYCHA Metrics posted on our website – will track our progress and the areas we need to improve.

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