

**TESTIMONY FROM NYCHA GENERAL MANAGER CECIL HOUSE
NYCHA'S EFFORTS TO REPAIR, REBUILD, AND RECOVER IN THE WAKE OF SANDY AND
OTHER DISASTERS
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HOUSING
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2013 – 1:30 PM
COMMITTEE ROOM, CITY HALL, NEW YORK, NY**

Chairwoman Rosie Mendez, members of the Committee on Public Housing, and other distinguished members of the City Council, good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) ongoing efforts to repair, rebuild, and recover in the wake of Superstorm Sandy. I am Cecil House, General Manager of the New York City Housing Authority. Joining me today are Raymond Ribeiro, NYCHA's Executive Vice President for Capital Projects; Carlos Laboy-Diaz, Executive Vice President for Operations; and other members of NYCHA's team.

Unprecedented Damage and the Need to Repair Better

As I testified before the City Council in January of this year, Superstorm Sandy presented our city and NYCHA developments with severe devastation. Members of this Committee saw firsthand some of the extensive damage to our buildings and infrastructure in tours of various developments immediately following the storm. Eighty thousand of our residents in 423 buildings were significantly affected, many of whom are still feeling the impact one year later. Despite the unprecedented challenges, NYCHA addressed the storm's destruction systematically, and with flexibility, hard work, and innovation. Our employees accomplished a great deal in the weeks after Sandy hit, working around the clock to restore electricity, heat, and hot water for our residents.

- We installed 23 mobile boilers and brought another group of boilers back online.
- We restored service to 397 elevators.
- We installed more than 100 generators.
- We hired 100 supplemental cleaning crews.

- We knocked on the doors of more than 24,000 units and made calls to another 33,000 to remediate mold.
- We issued approximately 350 emergency transfer vouchers for Sandy victims to locate alternate housing and coordinated building inspections in the impacted areas, advising tenants of the option to receive an immediate transfer voucher, where necessary.

This is just a small sample of the work required to respond to Superstorm Sandy. Support from Mayor Bloomberg's administration, other City agencies, union partners, as well as our federal and state partners, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was crucial to our results.

While NYCHA has made great strides in our restoration and preparation efforts in the past year, as you saw during our tour in Red Hook, Brooklyn, on November 1, there is still more work to be done. For instance, as of today, 24 temporary mobile boilers remain in place to provide heat for our residents until permanent repairs are made or permanent replacement boilers are installed. This may take another two heating seasons to complete. Moreover, we must rebuild infrastructure smarter and better to ensure that our buildings in the impacted areas can withstand any future disasters or extreme weather events.

This afternoon, I will give you an overview of our efforts to better protect against and prepare for emergencies, our plans to ensure resiliency for the long-term (provided sufficient funding is made available), and the funds received so far for our restoration work.

Organizational Transformation

Once we restored critical services – faster than many private landlords – we focused on relocating and rehousing impacted families, remediating apartments

and public spaces, and assessing and developing long-term capital solutions. In addition, we launched a thorough review of how our entire organization can become better prepared for emergencies. This involved engaging residents, staff, partners in the private and nonprofit sectors, and elected officials, including some of you, to collect feedback and recommendations on how we can better prepare for and respond to future emergency events. We also established an interdepartmental task force to analyze this feedback and implement lessons learned and initiatives that further our emergency preparedness goals. The feedback we gathered guided significant organizational changes and improvements, including the updating of NYCHA's hurricane and emergency procedures, strengthening internal and external communication, and establishing resident and community outreach protocols.

Communication

Realizing that more consistent, timely, and detailed communication is necessary, we updated our emergency communications plan, maximizing our reach to a variety of audiences, including residents, elected officials, and advocates. We improved our method for providing internal communication to staff. We established a single point of contact for communication and an internal protocol for communication and coordination with key external stakeholders, including City officials, utility companies, and community-based organizations (CBO). And we continue to share information with our partners in meetings and via social media, our website, and print publications. We created an online tool called "NYCHA Alerts," which encourages residents to sign up for updates on service outages and restorations. We have expanded the role of our Customer Contact Center to serve as a conduit and collector of information, which will enhance customer service for our residents. Our new robocall system can make approximately 10,000 calls per hour. And we are establishing additional backup methods for communicating with staff and other stakeholders in case of systems failures.

Resident Engagement and Community Outreach

A Resident Engagement Team, in concert with other NYCHA staff, led our efforts to connect with residents. We collected valuable feedback by conducting 36 on-site meetings in Coney Island, Red Hook, and the Rockaways attended by more than 600 residents. A phone survey of nearly 2,000 residents revealed that 56 percent of households have a family evacuation plan. Before Sandy, only 25 percent of households felt “very prepared” for a major hurricane, but now 43 percent feel “very prepared” and 37 percent feel “somewhat prepared.”

Based on the feedback gathered, we launched a comprehensive resident awareness campaign with partners like the New York City Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and the Red Cross. Called “NYCHA Prepares,” the campaign emphasizes the importance of residents taking an active role in preparing for emergencies, creating “go-bags,” and knowing their evacuation zone in case they have to heed mandatory evacuation orders. “Train the trainer” emergency preparedness sessions were held at senior centers in all five boroughs and preparedness information was disseminated across a variety of platforms, including print publications, our website, social media, and two live Facebook chats presented in partnership with OEM and the Red Cross. NYCHA employees also hosted separate Resident Response Team training sessions with OEM. Last month, we set up in the Lower East Side, Red Hook, and the Rockaways portable emergency command post tents we secured; more than 500 residents viewed the command posts in advance of an emergency and received emergency preparedness materials and services. During an actual emergency, these command posts will serve as visible and centrally located information hubs for residents.

Identifying Vulnerable Populations

To expand our database of vulnerable residents, we created an emergency registration form for residents to provide information about conditions that leave

them vulnerable and requiring help with an evacuation, information which can be quickly shared with other City agencies or providers in the event of an emergency. The form is available in multiple languages at developments' property management offices, community centers, NYCHA events, and online, and was distributed to every household this past July. As a result of our outreach and communication, about 1,000 residents citywide have completed the form to date. While the form is voluntary, we plan to increase awareness of its importance through additional communication to residents and employees NYCHA-wide.

Every year, residents self-identify as having a disability, including mobility, vision, hearing, or mental health disabilities, during the annual review process, and this information is recorded in NYCHA's resident database. As of July 1, 77,000 residents citywide identified themselves as seniors and 87,000 as having a disability, including 30,000 with mobility impairment – figures that are not mutually exclusive. We are working to finalize a system that generates online internal reports of this resident data by development, borough, and hurricane evacuation zone. Having this information readily available during an emergency will enable NYCHA staff to more quickly determine whether those residents with self-identified disabilities require assistance to evacuate or transportation to a medical facility (which would be coordinated with EMS). This information will also ensure that vulnerable residents who insist on sheltering-in-place are assessed for medical or other support needs and provided with information and resources to assist them in sheltering-in-place safely.

Community and Partner Outreach

During Sandy's aftermath, NYCHA was impressed with the agility, dedication, and resourcefulness of many CBOs in the impacted areas, whose volunteers distributed food, water, medicine, and other essentials to residents in need in an organized and orderly manner. While government, and NYCHA specifically, excel in many areas, we cannot be – nor should we be – expected to be responsible for

every aspect involved in any recovery process. By their very nature, CBOs are able to solicit and distribute donations quicker and without the bureaucracy associated with government. A lesson learned is that partnerships with CBOs are essential to resident engagement during and after a crisis. To that end, we clarified policies and procedures for managing donations and volunteers from external organizations, including CBOs, and partnered with NYC Service to register volunteers.

Since Sandy, NYCHA has engaged CBOs in Red Hook, the Lower East Side, and Coney Island, briefing these organizations on our future plans and discussing potential collaborations. We made sure these groups were able to participate meaningfully in the resident emergency preparedness events I discussed earlier. We look forward to strengthening these relationships moving forward, and I am hopeful that we are building a mutual trust which will allow us to serve residents more effectively in the future.

The Incident Command System

Another outcome of our “lessons learned” process is our implementation of the Incident Command System (ICS), a component of FEMA’s National Incident Management System that provides a consistent, nationwide approach and vocabulary for multiple agencies to work together during emergencies. ICS is a systematic tool that enables effective and efficient management of emergency incidents. By providing a standardized “chain of command” and management structure, ICS aligns us with other government agencies. Because it is highly adaptable, it can be used to organize both short- and long-term field-level operations for a broad spectrum of emergencies, from small to complex incidents, both natural and manmade. ICS’s common organizational structure facilitates response activities involving facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications. ICS is nationally proven – it is also used by the private sector and nongovernmental organizations. We have begun implementation organization-wide – a multi-year process – and are training and drilling staff on

the ICS approach: about 1,500 employees have been identified for, and/or have completed, mandatory training. The long-term goal is for every NYCHA employee to become familiar with ICS principles.

Other Internal Improvements

Following an assessment of our emergency equipment needs, we initiated contracts for renting items such as pumps, and are working with a vendor to set up equipment packages that can be deployed to developments in the event of an emergency. Also, a contract is in place for the provision of mobile boilers. To ensure continuity of operations, we established a second Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Brooklyn and expanded the existing EOC in Long Island City. Creating protocols for using community centers during an emergency fortifies our ability to respond to emergencies. By developing standardized reports, we ensure pertinent information is made available to support decision-making regarding resident outreach and property outages. We developed an emergency staffing plan for deploying staff to alternate work locations should their work location be closed as a result of an emergency event. Going forward, we will develop a skills assessment that allows us to deploy staff where they are most needed. We created a plan to protect and move critical inventory and equipment and implemented methods for capturing expenditures and labor costs during emergencies. We have reviewed and updated NYCHA's emergency procedures; to date, about 75 percent of staff have undergone training on these materials.

Restoring for a Resilient Tomorrow

In the year since Superstorm Sandy struck New York City, NYCHA has dedicated itself to ensuring that our buildings and equipment are protected and that our residents and staff are better prepared for emergencies. As soon as we stabilized impacted areas after the storm, Operations and Capital Projects staff assessed the damage to our infrastructure to determine the repairs needed. This work is

ongoing, and part of our process to ascertain how we can best restore for the future.

NYCHA's action plan identified approximately \$1.8 billion in potential Sandy-related expenditures based on this large-scale assessment. This includes more than \$150 million for operating costs and emergency repairs incurred in the weeks immediately after the storm. Also included in that amount are:

1. The cost of making permanent repairs, such as replacing electrical panels;
2. Elevating infrastructure and building new utility buildings;
3. Mitigation measures, such as providing emergency backup power; and
4. Other advanced approaches to restoration, like the use of combined heat and power plants.

Our plan includes \$50 million for programmatic improvements such as a new EOC, information technology disaster backup, program management, and training. We have identified a need for \$180 million for resiliency at community centers so they can be used as emergency centers and play a bigger role in serving our residents and the local community in future emergencies. Finally, the action plan includes a need of more than \$620 million for resiliency measures in areas that were impacted but not damaged as a result of Superstorm Sandy. This work will make our most vulnerable buildings and infrastructure resilient for the long-term and resistant to potential damage.

Restoration Funds Received to Date

However, only a fraction of the funding that we need to advance our efforts has actually been received. To date, NYCHA has received only \$129.8 million: \$3.5 million from FEMA and \$126.3 million from insurance. This does not even cover the costs that we incurred in our immediate response in the weeks after Sandy. The first tranche of HUD's Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funding allocates \$120 million to NYCHA for providing emergency backup power at approximately 100 buildings; however, NYCHA has not yet received this funding. HUD recently announced a second tranche of

CDBG-DR funding in the amount of \$1.4 billion for New York City. NYCHA is currently working with the Administration to determine how much of that allocation will be applied to NYCHA's needs.

A lack of funding has serious impact on the design and execution of repairs and resiliency efforts. Without the money we need for true resiliency, we will have to make tough but unavoidable choices that will be of consequence for the coming generations of NYCHA families. For instance, our equipment will simply be repaired and put back where it was before (which was the case following Hurricane Irene), putting it at risk for damage from future disasters. But even the current lack of certainty on funding is having an impact on our recovery. Without knowing what elements of our plan will be funded, design decisions for even simple repairs cannot be made and we cannot begin the requisite design, procurement, and construction process. In the interim, the temporary systems and repairs we made in the weeks after the storm continue to serve our residents.

In addition to the capital needs that have been described, Superstorm Sandy will have a long-lasting impact on NYCHA's operating budget. Our insurance premiums have increased significantly – over 300 percent annually, for about half the coverage. These increased insurance costs are not eligible for any of the potential Sandy funding sources that have been described; therefore, these costs must be absorbed by our already limited operating revenue streams.

Conclusion

Due to our intensive assessments, on-the-ground efforts, and planning, NYCHA properties are better protected and our residents and staff are better prepared for emergencies. However, there is a lot more work that needs to be done, and as of today, NYCHA has received only a portion of the money we need. Additional funding will enable us to recover from Superstorm Sandy's destruction in a way that is as smart, strong, and resilient as possible. As much as last year's storm has been an incredible challenge, it also presents an opportunity to pursue a more

sustainable future. Partnership – including with elected officials and other external stakeholders – is also essential to our efforts to tackle the challenges we have been served and to safeguard against any incidents that may arise.

Future generations of NYCHA residents depend on us to make the right choices today. We look forward to working with the Administration and City Council on these very important issues.

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