

Local 237 Head: Struggling To Restore HA Normalcy

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Monday, November 19, 2012 4:00 pm

Power was finally restored Nov. 13 to the last of the Housing Authority projects damaged by Hurricane Sandy, but conditions remain grim for many tenants, and many lessons need to be learned, said Teamsters Local 237 President Gregory Floyd.

Mr. Floyd, who represents most HA workers, declined to join the pile-on of criticism from many elected officials and the Daily News editorial board, which has demanded HA Chairman John Rhea's resignation for insisting that tenants continue to pay rent even though some 18,000 were without heat and hot water for two weeks.

'Could Have Reacted Faster'

"This is a storm that we should all learn from, as we learned from 9/11. It had not happened here before," Mr. Floyd said in a phone interview. "It's hard to say we should have been better-prepared for it. It's not how you prepare, it's how you react. We could have reacted a little faster—try to get equipment in to pump out the water in the basement, to dry out electrical supplies."

A lack of pumping equipment and infrastructure to supply power to pumps was one of the reasons for the severe delays in restoring power to buildings in the Rockaways, Red Hook and Lower Manhattan, Mr. Floyd said.

"I know that NYCHA does not have the equipment," he said. "I think it's going to be a long impact. Some of the damage may have been extensive—to people's homes, to some of the power sources.

"But I'm not going to point a finger and say anybody screwed up," he added.

Employees Came to Work

Mr. Floyd said his members had been valiant in reporting for work and attempting to keep tenants' lives as normal as possible after the storm's devastation. "The residents were without heat, without water, in some cases without food. They couldn't get up and down the stairs. In some of these high-rise developments, seniors were trapped," he said.

"We went for days without basic services," he continued. "Our members came to work and some of them stayed there. They had nowhere to sleep, no provisions for cots, or centers to go and rest their heads while they waited to perform their duties. Yet they came to work, performed their

duties, and kept the HA running.”

In some buildings, life was not close to normal, he added. “They had to improvise. We had people roving around with survival kits, sandwiches, flashlights, water. Basically what they did was whatever they could do. There was no book to follow, there was no manual written for this. A lot of this was common-sense survival.”

Although power is now back, heat and hot water will arrive slowly, and Mr. Floyd said that whether every unit in every project had power had not been confirmed.

Public Advocate Bill De Blasio has hectored the agency for saying that its tenants should continue to pay rent and expect a rebate in January, which Mr. Rhea called “a nice little Christmas present” in one meeting with tenants, according to the Daily News.

‘No Services, No Rent’

“This policy in no way reflects the immediate needs of affected developments,” Mr. De Blasio said in a letter to Mr. Rhea. “NYCHA should cease rent collection in affected developments until basic services are restored, such as electricity, heat and hot water. No tenant in public housing should be forced to pay the city for rent they do not actually owe.”

A Nov. 14 report that HA General Manager Cecil House told employees not to talk to the press or elected officials sparked further outrage.

The memo was sent out on Nov. 2, four days after the storm, and was distributed to 11,500 agency staffers. The names of any elected officials asking questions should be forwarded to the HA “intergovernmental team,” Mr. House wrote.