

Local 237 Declined HA Basement Cleanup Job As a Safety Hazard

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Monday, December 10, 2012 5:00 pm

The Housing Authority has hired private contractors to scrub toxic mold from basements flooded by Hurricane Sandy after Teamsters Local 237 President Gregory Floyd balked at having his members do the work because the agency would not provide training and protective gear.

The private workers being sent into the buildings lack the same training and precautions, which could lead to a serious health risk if the basements are not properly scrubbed, Mr. Floyd said in a phone interview.

'Risks Long-Term Damage'

"If the cleanup is not done properly, the damage to our members will have a long-term health effect on their lives," he said. "Years after, people are still suffering from the effects of 9/11. This is a natural disaster; however the effects could be the same. People could have serious lung illnesses because of this. The people living in the Housing Authority will have illnesses too."

A Dec. 3 Daily News article charged that Belfor, the company contracted by HA to clean the storm-damaged basements, had hired day laborers to do some of the work and given them insufficient protective clothing and only a "brief rundown" on how to clean the basements.

U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration Area Director Richard Mendelson was quoted saying there had been safety issues and that the company was "addressing it."

'Not a Mop-Up Job'

Mr. Floyd confirmed that HA had reached out to him about his members doing the work. "We informed the HA that we would require training and protective equipment," he said. "The HA decided that they were going to hire a company to do the cleanup. Which is perfectly fine.

"It's the responsibility of the HA to make sure that the companies they hire are able to perform the job they are hired to do, which means they have the training and equipment to clean the developments properly," he continued. "This is not a mop-up job, we're not cleaning up leaves outside the development."

The major risk is posed by pollutants that came into the basement after flooding from the rivers or ocean. "Now you have the potential for mold because it had been there for so long. You're talking about damp basements that are 60 years old," Mr. Floyd said.

To clean such toxic mold, OSHA required that workers wear protective body suits, respirators and

waterproof boots. One of the workers told the News that he was given rubber gloves, safety goggles and paper masks.

HA spokeswoman Sheila Stainback said in a statement, “Belfor is an experienced provider of remediation services and we expect them to ensure proper procedures are followed in all aspects of their work with [us].”