

More Than a Sleep-Over, Visit a Real Eye-Opener

By GREGORY FLOYD | Posted: Monday, July 29, 2013 5:00 pm

As president of Teamsters City Employees Local 237, I represent nearly 9,000 members who work in developments operated by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).

Their work ranges from apartment repairs, to grounds caretakers, boiler and elevator services, to rent collections. About one-third of these workers also live in NYCHA apartments throughout the city.

Sequestration Cuts Hurt

The problems in public housing have gotten a great deal of attention lately, as the long-standing tenant and worker frustration reached a new high due to sequestration cuts in Federal dollars—basically, the only source of funding for the largest and oldest public housing in the nation.

The \$208 million in cuts would mean a loss of jobs and services. Despite Mayor Bloomberg's pledge to restore \$58 million of Federal dollars lost, the fact remains that NYCHA already has a \$61-million operating deficit and \$6-7 billion in much-needed capital repairs. This is a case of too little, too late.

With a three-year backlog of repairs, security cameras funded but not installed, reminders of Hurricane Sandy everywhere in affected developments (and still without a plan to overcome the devastation of the next storm) and with a proposal—long kept secret—to build high-end housing on NYCHA property, I have joined our members and residents to tell Chairman Rhea: "Enough is Enough!" We even held a huge rally at City Hall recently to send a strong message to all of the mayoral contenders: "NYCHA is broken. You need to fix it."

All of the candidates were invited to join the protest. Only one showed up—Bill Thompson. Bill not only vowed to end the long suffering of the more than 600,000 NYCHA residents if he becomes Mayor, he also called for the immediate dismissal of Mr. Rhea by Mayor Bloomberg.

I guess I wasn't surprised when Bill Thompson invited me to join him and the other mayoral candidates for a "sleep-over" organized by the Rev. Al Sharpton at a NYCHA development, Lincoln Houses in East Harlem. The choice of Lincoln Houses was not random. Residents of the aging, 25-building complex are suing NYCHA for 3,800 unfulfilled repair orders dating back to 2009. Bill knew I had made repeated attempts to address the backlog and other key problems, including giving an extensive recommendation report to Chairman Rhea, all of which went unheeded.

Felt Her Struggles

So, after the many speeches and the grounds tour covered by dozens of reporters during the night of the sleep-over, Bill and I met our host, Mrs. Barbara Gamble, a NYCHA resident for 44 years, 30 years of which were in the 10th-floor apartment we visited. Without air conditioning on this sweltering night and with mold throughout the bathroom, we could now feel the human pain associated with the repair tickets that dated back so many years. We saw the struggles of Mrs. Gamble—a proud grandmother who takes matters into her own hands by routinely cleaning the hallways of her entire floor!

When we met with the other candidates the next morning, the talk was about what they saw in their host apartments: ripped-out kitchen cabinets, chipped paint, water damage, faulty toilets, broken flooring and urine in the elevators (which frequently do not work).

But, in my view, this was not the worst part of living in a NYCHA development. No, it was the news that a few days after our visit, a 23-year-old woman was shot to death on the project's grounds in a location where NYCHA failed to install security cameras even though \$1 million had been allocated by an NYC Council member.

Broken HA Management

Despite these conditions, 227,000 people are on a waiting list for a NYCHA apartment because affordable housing in NYC is scarce. With an average of only 5,400 to 5,800 openings annually, the wait can take years.

NYCHA began more than 75 years ago as an experiment in municipal responsibility that developed into a model of social pride. Many former residents, including a Mayor, a Supreme Court Justice, and a world-renowned entertainment mogul, have all gone on to make a lasting, positive impact on society. Yet, as I saw the hardships of Barbara Gamble and her neighbors first-hand, it became clear that what is wrong with public housing today is not only broken buildings, but broken management.

The next Mayor, with the ability to appoint a new Chairman and form a new board, also has the ability to fix it.