

Housing Authority, Union Cite Decline in Injuries

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, June 22, 2015 5:00 pm

Workers responsible for the day-to-day upkeep of the Housing Authority's aging buildings have a dangerous job. Slippery floors, sewer backups and broken lightbulbs are all part of why 200 people are out each day, on average, because of injuries.

But the agency and the union that represents nearly 8,000 HA workers, Teamsters Local 237, credited their collaboration for reducing the number of injuries over the last couple of years. At a June 18 safety symposium at Manhattan's James Weldon Johnson Houses that coincided with "National Safety Month," General Manager Michael Kelly updated employees on the HA's progress.



Michael Kelly

MICHAEL KELLY: Injury drop offers multiple dividends.

A Steady Decline

Injuries decreased by 7 percent in 2014 over the previous year, he said. Since 2012, the number of reported on-the-job injuries fell by 109 to 1,027 last year.

He credited part of the progress to monthly "safety congresses" in each borough to identify unsafe conditions. The HA also received a training grant to investigate injuries from the state Hazard Abatement Board and it spent \$1 million on safety equipment.

"Reducing injuries would decrease strain on those who have to cover for absent co-workers, improve morale, and result in better service to residents," Mr. Kelly said, according to a copy of his prepared remarks.

A recent "Make It Safe" program allows workers to stop activities they think are dangerous for themselves or coworkers. Mr. Kelly said that this year, the HA will add more training, safety audits, inspections and plans.

Local 237 President Greg Floyd said workers should be "optimistic" about the decrease in reported incidents.

"They should work with the safety coordinators at the site to make sure that they report all unsafe conditions," he said. "And we would encourage NYCHA to continue the safety coordinator program and have regularly scheduled meetings to ensure the safety of its employees."

'Can Continue the Trend'

Mr. Floyd said that Mr. Kelly's predecessor, Cecil House, used to play a large role in high-level safety meetings. "If that continues, they can continue the trend of ensuring work-related injuries decrease," he said.

The safety summit came three months after the death of a Caretaker, Toni Jackson, at the Coney Island Houses. Following the accident, where she was found wedged in a hoist, the Office of Chief Medical Examiner ruled she died from natural causes. But Local 237 maintains that the hoist played a larger role in her death than the city has admitted. Reports from the local and by the Department of Investigation pointed at the lack of maintenance of the jury-rigged hoists at developments across the city. The HA pulled them out of service following the accident, but Mr. Floyd said members have since been dragging garbage up stairs. (The local appealed to the Brooklyn District Attorney for an investigation, but hasn't yet heard back, he said.)

New Glow of Safety

In another initiative, the HA has issued safety vests to elevator workers through its "Safety in Motion" initiative to increase their visibility, particularly at night. After a rookie Police Officer accidentally shot and killed 28-year-old Akai Gurley last December in a dimly-lit stairwell in Brooklyn's Pink Houses, Mr. Floyd said the poor lighting conditions had led to officers patrolling developments with their guns drawn, sometimes at Elevator Mechanics.

A Local 237 official said building-wide safety representatives were helping to ensure that potential hazards were being fixed and that the agency has been more willing to address some issues. Those include putting down anti-skid mats in slippery stairwells and performing more-extensive remediation when rat traps fail to remove an infestation.

The HA is undergoing a reorganization, announced last month, which will include leasing some land to developers, shrinking its back-office workforce and handing over community and senior centers to other agencies in order to fill in budget gaps and speed up repairs.