

# The Leak That Canceled Christmas And Other HA Horror Stories—Audit

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, July 20, 2015 4:45 pm

In his sixth audit of the Housing Authority since becoming City Comptroller in January 2014, Scott Stringer last week criticized the agency for delays in fixing chronic problems in residents' apartments. The HA preemptively struck back, saying he was "recycling old news" that didn't take into account a spate of reforms since the review ended in July 2014.

Announcing the July 13 audit, which found the agency under-reported data on its maintenance backlog, missed repair deadlines, and didn't train employees to treat mold and mildew in tenants' apartments, Mr. Stringer called the results a "case study in mismanagement."

## 'A Decade-Long Leak'

"During our audit we learned of one tenant who had a leaky ceiling that was so bad that she had to cancel Christmas, and another who had to deal with a leak for more than a decade," he said in a statement. "We also heard from a NYCHA tenant who was forced to live with mold for 11 years."

The report found that, in the most extreme example across the developments surveyed, there were 2,300 outstanding work orders at the Robert F. Wagner Houses in Manhattan as of July 2014. As of September, there were 44 outstanding violations issued by the Department of Buildings at the 57-year-old development.

Mr. Stringer also accused the HA of gaming the system to make it seem like more repairs were being addressed than actually were. For example, the 84,500 work orders open last July were undercounted by at least 50,000 because the HA closed non-urgent repairs when residents weren't at home during the attempt or on the second visit for emergency repairs. The report noted that as recently as April, the HA had 120,730 open work orders, roughly 30,000 more than its "manageable" workload, and it found that the HA considered there was no backlog if the number



## HOUSE IN DISORDER

HOUSE IN DISORDER: Scott Stringer is surrounded by tenants as he releases his sixth audit critical of the Housing Authority since becoming City Comptroller. Though his office found a backlog of 55,000 delayed work orders, the agency disputed the analysis as old information that didn't take into account recent changes to speed repairs.

of open repair requests fell under 90,000.

### **In Dark on Productivity**

Auditors asked officials how 26 “productivity-improvement drivers” were being implemented and were told “that they had no knowledge of the productivity drivers or documentation related to NYCHA’s efforts to address them.”

“Making problems disappear on paper, while leaving residents to deal with leaky plumbing, faulty wiring and falling plaster is the worst kind of magic trick,” Mr. Stringer said. “Creative accounting is simply not the solution.”

But the HA, in a rebuttal issued in advance of the report, said it had been open about the challenges of meeting maintenance and work orders and had adopted a plan to keep a “scorecard” for repair requests, emergency-service levels, budget, customer service and resident satisfaction. It also compared missing a repair appointment to a doctor’s appointment—it doesn’t remain on the books even though the patient remains sick.

A spokeswoman also disputed the timeliness of the audit, which included a 13-month period before Mayor de Blasio appointed HA Chair Shola Olatoye in February 2014.

### **‘Outdated Data’**

“The Comptroller is recycling old news on NYCHA’s maintenance and repairs,” Chief Communications Officer Jean Weinberg said in a statement. “Rather than reviewing outdated data, we welcome common-sense solutions and ideas that will improve the quality of life for our residents.”

The agency said that the “NextGeneration” plan—which seeks to save money by paring down many of the redundant or non-housing responsibilities of the agency—made many of the findings outdated.

For example, the audit alleged the majority of mold repairs were done improperly by poorly trained workers; the HA countered that it was spending \$300 million to fix roofs and prevent moisture-related problems.

The agency has said that its progress is stymied by decades of underfunding from Washington, D.C. and Albany. Ms. Olatoye said last week in a NY1 interview with Errol Louis that Federal funding—the agency’s largest outside revenue source—accounted for about \$2,000 per unit.

“That’s not enough money to run any apartment, certainly not apartments that have not seen real investments since they were built,” she said.

### **Calls for ‘NYCHASat’**

Though some community advocates called on Ms. Olatoye to step down, Mr. Stringer, Teamsters Local 237 and other public officials last month reaffirmed their support for her.

Mr. Stringer also released a “reform agenda” that included a “NYCHASat” program, modeled after the NYPD’s CompStat tool, to offer a real-time breakdown of maintenance statistics and complaint logs. (The HA said it intends to release a mobile application this summer.)

The Comptroller also suggested the HA release a comprehensive overview of its infrastructure needs, disclose its budgetary reports and financial plans more frequently and use a \$400-million surplus from the quasi-governmental Battery Park City Authority to pay for capital improvements.