

Greater Say Pleases HA Supervisor

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, October 19, 2015 5:30 pm

When he was a kid, Harrison Torres said, he thought Housing Authority employees had easy jobs. But years later, as a Caretaker, he dealt with snow, sludge and the debris after firefighters extinguished a burning trash compactor. “You’re talking about a lot of garbage; now I’ve got to clean this up,” he said.

Mr. Torres, a Supervisor of Caretakers at Patterson Houses in the South Bronx since June 2014, now oversees 19 people, he said. He keeps tabs on his workers and tracks routine maintenance requests. He and his colleagues are also front-line troopers in a new effort by the HA, officially called the Optimal Property Management Operating Model, which gives Property Managers more authority over local staffing and budgetary decisions. Since January, he has gotten more money, staff and supplies, and with less micro-management from the HA’s top-level staffers.



New Developments

NEW DEVELOPMENTS: Harrison Torres, a Supervisor of Caretakers at the Housing Authority, says conditions at the Patterson Houses in the Mott Haven section of The Bronx have improved since more resources were provided under ‘NextGeneration NYCHA.’

Poster Boy for Campaign

Mr. Torres, 43, was featured by the agency in a campaign to showcase some of the changes made under the NextGeneration NYCHA campaign. To produce more revenue and reduce costs, the HA in May released the plan to increase rent collection, offer some underused land to private developers for affordable and market-rate housing, and reduce the agency’s administrative headcount through attrition and transfers to other agencies.

Some critics have said the plan could open the door to privatization.

HA: That’s Not Intent

The HA said OPMOM is intended to save it money, allow for bottom-up input from staff members and residents, and speed up repairs. The pilot project launched in 18 developments in The Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn in January, and the HA expects to expand it to all of its developments within five years. Basic repair times have been reduced to 5½ days, HA officials said last month.

“With employees becoming more empowered to make good management decisions for their developments, residents will also see more accountability,” HA Chair Shola Olatoye said in March.

Mr. Torres in an interview cited the differences he’s observed as he climbed the agency’s hierarchy. Before he became a Caretaker, he was a part-time laborer for the agency at the Johnson Houses in Manhattan, where he still lives, under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Section 3 program that helps connect HA residents to jobs. Soon after starting as a Caretaker in 2010 he had to deal with a large snowstorm and was tempted to quit, but after he completed his year-long probationary period he took classes run by his union to prep for the Supervisor test.

Big Staff Increase

He works with a staff of nearly 30, but when he began, there were 25 buildings with nine or 10 Caretakers among them. With more money and the local authority to budget some of it locally, closets of lightbulbs, snow shovels and brooms are well-stocked and employees aren’t rushing as much and putting themselves in danger of over-exertion. “Before we were just working and working and working, and we didn’t even get to know each other,” Mr. Torres said.

He and his superiors work under HA’s Director of Asset Management, which directs Regional Managers.

Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd, whose organization represents 8,000 HA employees including Mr. Torres, said the practice of letting developments schedule their own work dated back a decade or more before a move to centralize operations. He said it was too early to gauge the success of the effort. “It is the way the Housing Authority used to run when it ran more efficiently,” he said, adding that “with the right personnel, with optimal training, this could work.”