



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
SCOTT M. STRINGER

November 12, 2019

Greg Russ
Chairman & Chief Executive Officer
New York City Housing Authority
250 Broadway
New York, NY 10007

Re: Delays in Restoring Gas Service

Dear Chairman Russ,

I am writing to express my grave concern over reports that residents of several NYCHA buildings have gone without gas service for months and, in some cases, close to a year. As a result of NYCHA's failure to address these natural gas leaks, Manhattan's East River Houses and Bronx's Sack Wern complexes have been without cooking gas since April 2019, King Towers since June 2019 and West Side Urban Renewal (WSUR) Brownstones have just recently been reconnected after an outage of nearly a year, according to NYCHA's Service Interruptions Overview. They are among 40-plus NYCHA developments that the agency now lists as lacking gas service as the holiday season approaches. I am urging NYCHA to fulfill its responsibility to its tenants and restore gas service as soon as possible to all affected communities. Anything less is unacceptable.

Understandably, the danger posed by faulty gas lines warrants close scrutiny and decisive action. We know all too well the costs to property, safety, and even lives that gas leaks can pose. However, those concerns should not be used as an excuse to deny people the timely services to which they are entitled – in this case, for months on end.

While I understand management has provided hot plates for residents, tenants who pay a third of their incomes in rent should not be forced to make use of a single hotplate to put food on their family's table. The reality is that NYCHA's failure to restore gas service carries heavy financial and personal costs for tenants, who in the absence of real cooking equipment are too often forced to order prepared food from outside. Of course, not only is commercially prepared food more costly, it can be less healthy and less conducive to family wellbeing. Given that the average income in East River Houses amounts to approximately \$22,476 a year, any change in tenants' ability to cook at home must be regarded as a severe burden to residents.

Apart from the prolonged nature of these service outages, I am concerned with the level of transparency and engagement with residents. It has come to my attention that an emergency meeting at East River Houses was scheduled for Thursday, April 25th at 7:00 p.m., but the management team did not attend. A lobby filled with tenants was told that the management had

arrived thirty minutes earlier at 6:30 p.m. and left before the meeting occurred. A follow-up meeting was scheduled on June 6th, 2019, but flyers were not distributed to the tenants or posted. Since then, NYCHA has only offered that contractors are “scheduled to work at 400 East 105th Street on the E & F lines on Tues 10/22 and on the F& H lines on Wed 10/23” but has given no indication of when service will be restored following the work.

NYCHA owes its tenants a clear and transparent estimate of its timeline for service restoration. Sadly, this latest instance of NYCHA’s inability to appropriately communicate with tenants fits into a larger, well documented pattern. As noted in the first Quarterly Report from NYCHA’s Federal Monitor, it is common for residents and staff to not be notified of maintenance and/or capital improvements until “workers showed up to start the project.” Regarding natural gas service specifically, residents advised the Federal Monitor that NYCHA was ineffective at communicating with “city agencies regarding gas leaks and, as a result, residents are often left without gas well beyond the time it takes to repair leaks. The problem, no doubt, stems in part from the Monitor’s finding that “NYCHA does not have complete, and in some cases accurate” contact information for both the Tennant Association Presidents and other residents, which is an inexcusable oversight that needs to be rectified immediately.

Surely, even if outages are necessary to ensure safety, residents deserve to know what is happening and when work is occurring. At East River Houses and others with month-long or year-long gas outages, tenants deserve consistent communication on the state of their building, a timeline for when work is likely be completed, and solutions that go beyond hot plates. When an essential service is not supplied for an extended period, it is only right that NYCHA offer reimbursement for food expenses and proper abatements on monthly bills to compensate for slow repairs. According to my communications with residents of East River Houses, requests for reimbursements made at the June 6th meeting were summarily denied by management; instead flyers explaining how to apply for food stamps were posted in elevators. This is entirely unacceptable.

As we now approach the holiday season, many families across the city are looking forward to gathering together and cooking a Thanksgiving turkey at home – a prospect that is being needlessly denied to too many NYCHA families as a result of the agency’s shameful foot-dragging. NYCHA must do better.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller