



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

April 8, 2020

Commissioner Louise Carroll
Department of Housing Preservation and Development
100 Gold Street
New York, NY 10038

Commissioner Dr. Oxiris Barbot
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
42-09 28th St
Queens, NY 11101

Re: Action Needed to Support Senior Residents in Section 202 Housing

Dear Commissioners Carroll and Barbot:

As the novel coronavirus 2019 (“COVID-19”) spreads through New York, affecting the lives of everyone in the City, the decisions made now by government in the name of public health and safety can save lives. That is why we are writing to urge both the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) to pay special attention to seniors in subsidized housing. Specifically, there is a need to support buildings in the federal Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Section 202 program, which as you know provides very low-income seniors with housing and services intended to help older New Yorkers live independently. These properties are home to thousands of low-income seniors across the five boroughs, all of whom are today at increased risk to contract COVID-19 due to their age.

In New York City, there are more than 25,000 seniors in Section 202 units who are over the age of 62, and almost 7,000 residents are 85 years of age or older. The City’s many nursing homes have round-the-clock healthcare professionals on staff and have received strict safety guidelines from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which includes advice on quarantine and triaging strategy, managing food vendor interactions and screening for fevers, as well as crucial directives that banned outside visitors and communal activities. There is no comparable support or guidance for Section 202 buildings, which serve the same population but are owned and operated by private developers and are sustained mostly through capital advances and rental vouchers. There is no good public health reason for Section 202 buildings to be exempted from similar public health

guidelines, and yet that is exactly what is happening today.

To be sure, this situation is largely due to HUD's failure to properly serve these residents. While the most recent federal stimulus package did include additional HUD funds to help Section 202 buildings to hire Service Coordinators and defray other operational expenses related to the pandemic, we remain concerned about the lack of precise guidance for these building managers, or their capacity to properly and immediately protect the health of their residents. The official COVID-19 Q&A produced by HUD for building managers includes none of the necessary restrictions now being placed on city nursing homes¹, and in general simply directs providers to adhere to local guidelines and offers links to generic information produced by the federal Centers for Disease Control. We find this level of response to be deeply insufficient given the potential danger COVID-19 poses to our senior population in the City. Sadly, we also have zero confidence in the current federal Administration's ability to respond more proactively.

Therefore, given the urgency of the crisis that confronts us, we are urging HPD and DOHMH to work together to address the needs of our older New Yorkers living in Section 202 buildings, and to treat them the same as nursing homes or other facilities serving older New Yorkers. The City should move immediately to carry out an expedited needs assessment of every Section 202 building in the city and offer tools and resources to help building managers protect its senior residents. The effort should include clear guidance on how to deal with staff and resident infections, quarantine protocols, restrictions around visitor access, cleaning and service requirements, and plans for providing food and healthcare during the pandemic. Depending on the result of the needs assessment, 202 properties may very well need an increased supply of personal protective equipment for staff, additional training for all those who come into contact with senior residents, and access to dedicated medical professionals to help guide efforts.

We know that focusing on our city's most high-risk citizens is critical to mitigating this crisis. Curbing the volume of ill patients that need extensive hospital care will help to alleviate stress on our already overburdened healthcare system. By identifying high-risk communities like Section 202 buildings and proactively offering care to residents in need of help and access to needed supplies, lives can be saved.

We appreciate that this is a rapidly changing situation, and that the demands currently placed on all city agencies are unprecedented. We extend our deepest thanks to you and your colleagues for your collective efforts to date to inform and protect our City, and your help in seeing us through this crisis. Our offices stand ready to assist and be a resource in any way we can in the days and weeks ahead.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller



Harvey Epstein
New York State Assembly

¹ https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/Housing/documents/MF_Corona_QA_FINAL_3-16-20.pdf