



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

October 26, 2020

The Honorable Bill de Blasio  
Mayor, City of New York  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Gregory Russ  
Chair and Chief Executive Officer  
New York City Housing Authority  
250 Broadway  
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Preparations for Winter Amid COVID-19**

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Chair Russ:

As winter approaches, I am writing to underscore the urgent need to protect NYCHA residents from a possible “second wave” of COVID-19, and from challenges posed by colder weather that will keep more tenants indoors. I am concerned that NYCHA’s poor state of repair, amounting to more than \$40 billion in unmet capital needs, will result in unsafe conditions for residents. The heat and elevator outages, mold outbreaks, and poor ventilation that already plague NYCHA will only become more dangerous to residents as they take refuge from COVID-19 within their apartments and may significantly increase the likelihood that NYCHA residents will face a heightened risk of exposure to the virus. As of last May 11<sup>th</sup> – the most recent data available – 1,241 NYCHA residents had died as a result of the virus.<sup>1 2</sup>

As is evident from that stark figure, residents in NYCHA developments have already been severely impacted by this pandemic. In the earliest weeks between March 1 and May 11, more than 7,800 NYCHA residents tested positive for the virus.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/362-20/transcript-mayor-de-blasio-holds-media-availability>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ewscripps.brightspotcdn.com/4d/1c/c2c5003545619ece9111f4ddcaef/deaths-and-cases-nycha-nyc-as-of-11may20-final-v2.pdf>

The toll was particularly devastating for NYCHA residents living in the agency’s senior-only housing, including developments where infection rates reached more than 7 cases per 100 residents such as Middletown Plaza, the converted Public School 139, Upaca (Site 5), and East 152 ST-Courtland Ave.<sup>3</sup> What we know for sure is that COVID does, in fact, discriminate and is much more likely to infect older people and people of color, both high-risk groups that are prevalent in NYCHA developments across the five boroughs.

To help assure that all possible steps are taken to safeguard NYCHA tenants this winter, pursuant to my office’s authority under Chapter 5 of the City Charter, I hereby request that you provide the specific information requested below in writing to my office by no later than November 9, 2020:

1. **Ventilation systems:** NYCHA’s ventilation systems, including those in 240 developments using mechanical exhaust roof fans, are notoriously prone to breaking down and fail to provide the indoor airflow that is necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and conditions like asthma.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, all but two of NYCHA’s 41 exclusively senior developments have old, defunct ventilation systems.<sup>5</sup> Ventilation issues are particularly acute in buildings that are included in the Metro Industrial Area Foundation lawsuit over mold issues – issues exacerbated by the slow pace of plans, now years behind schedule, to replace some 10,000 roof fans. We now face a scenario where residents in every single building that has yet to have these fans replaced could be at greater risk.
  - What steps are being taken to modernize air ventilation systems in each NYCHA facility?
  - Please provide the timeline for completion of any modernization work on the ventilation systems, by building.
  
2. **“Second Wave” Precautions:** As COVID-19 rates rise above summer levels, NYCHA must take every possible precaution to protect its residents and workers against a second wave of the virus. Providing adequate PPE, sanitizing highly trafficked areas, and delivering food to residents all can help to reduce risk and save lives.
  - What steps is NYCHA taking to ensure its residents and workers are adequately equipped to cope with any outbreaks or clusters of COVID-19 linked to a NYCHA building and to defend against rising rates of transmission?
  - Please describe any specific programs and procedures established to address NYCHA’s needs in the event of a “second wave” of the virus.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on NYC Comptroller Analysis of the “Cases, Confirmed Deaths, and Probable Deaths by NYCHA Development and Status of COVID Mar 1 - May 11, NYC” and NYCHA Development Data Book

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thecity.nyc/coronavirus/2020/8/18/21370162/nycha-roof-fan-tenants-exposed-covid-mold-contractor>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thecity.nyc/coronavirus/2020/10/6/21505183/seniors-nycha-buildings-ventilation-covid-health-nyc>

3. **Elevators:** Crowding — and, as a result, viral spread — are increased when elevators break down. In September alone, there were over 3,600 elevator outages in NYCHA buildings.<sup>6</sup> These outages often force residents to cram into a smaller number of available, functional elevators, which in turn can thwart social distancing guidelines.
  - What steps are being taken to ensure the reliability of all elevators in NYCHA developments?
  - Please provide the timeline for the completion of any elevator improvement activities described in response to the question above by building?
  
4. **Heating & Boilers:** Ensuring reliable heating must also be an absolute priority for NYCHA during a winter when residents can be expected to be regularly confined to their apartments due to COVID-19 restrictions. Last year, just between October and December, more than 134,000 NYCHA residents lost heat as a result of 322 separate outages.<sup>7</sup> This winter is expected to begin with an early season chill that will lower temperatures and is very likely to see more snow than last year's near-record low.<sup>8</sup> The annual deluge of sudden heating outages that strike residents every holiday season must not occur this year, and it is my hope that the Heat Action Plan adopted by the agency in December 2019 can begin to make a real difference in the lives of residents.
  - What steps are being taken to replace old boilers and to upgrade heating systems in all NYCHA developments?
  - Please provide the timeline for completion of the work described in response to the question above by building?
  
5. **Mold:** Mold remains one of the most persistent problems throughout NYCHA, which is of particular concern amid the current pandemic as many conditions exacerbated by mold — including asthma — can complicate recovery from COVID-19. Having proper ventilation systems as discussed above is one critical strategy for eradicating mold, but there are other steps that could be taken to alleviate mold outbreaks.
  - What steps are being taken toward eradicating mold in all NYCHA developments?
  - Please provide the timeline for completion of the measures described above by building.

While I fully recognize the financial constraints now facing NYCHA, I also recognize that the agency has resources it can utilize in order to make critical capital improvements — including Hurricane Sandy-related funds still not spent some eight years after the superstorm battered the region. Indeed, a review by my office finds that, as of June 30<sup>th</sup> this year, NYCHA had been awarded \$3.1 billion in FEMA grants yet has only spent approximately 59 percent of this amount, which could help repair leaky roofs, faulty heating systems, mold, and other capital needs that would help address the problems described above.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the Federal Government granted NYCHA over \$300 million in Community Development Block Grant funding. As of the second quarter of this year, the agency had only spent 78 percent of the total

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<sup>6</sup> <https://my.nycha.info/Outages/Outages.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/03/05/nycha-struggles-to-keep-new-yorkers-warm-even-with-the-mild-winter/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.accuweather.com/en/winter-weather/accuweathers-2020-2021-us-winter-forecast/818601>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nycha/about/recovery-resiliency.page>

allocation.<sup>10</sup> These and other sources of capital dollars can be used to substantially improve conditions at NYCHA buildings and protect against future storms and floods and thereby help to protect its residents in the face of the continued threat of infection from COVID-19.

We are in the throes of a public health emergency that is testing all levels of government, requiring us to innovate daily. I urge you to protect the most vulnerable New Yorkers and expedite capital projects that can improve ventilation in developments, elevators, boilers and other mechanical systems as the weather turns cold. Thank you in advance for your prompt attention, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues in greater detail.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott M. Stringer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Scott" and last name "Stringer" clearly distinguishable.

Scott M. Stringer  
New York City Comptroller

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/content/sandytracker/pages/other-grants>