



The Impacts of Living in NYCHA

Needs for resident health
in the Rockaways and beyond



Produced in Partnership with Community Voices Heard, July 2020

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This report is meant to highlight the urgency with which we need to bring better conditions to NYCHA, because not doing so has a direct effect on the health of hundreds of thousands of residents.



- ▶ **81 percent of residents** need immediate repairs to their apartments, with more than half needing bathroom repairs and 45 percent needing kitchen repairs.
- ▶ **One-quarter of residents** say that living conditions directly affect their physical health, with residents experiencing conditions ranging from asthma and other respiratory issues to central nervous system problems and chronic fatigue.
- ▶ **One-third of residents** say that living conditions directly affect their mental health, adding greatly to stress, depression, and other issues.

The people in New York City leading both the efforts to bring attention to the deteriorating conditions in our public housing, and the efforts to have them repaired, are their residents.

It is important to recognize that government and civic organizations, as well as the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) itself, have only followed after. We all benefit from public housing, and the entire city would be hugely affected by its loss. However, NYCHA residents need to be recognized as both the people with the most at stake, and the people who have taken the most direct initiative to secure repairs, both inside and outside of the existing resident engagement structure. For this, we all owe a debt of gratitude.

Access to budgets, physical needs assessments, and other documents are necessary to obtain a true picture of NYCHA, as are conversations with stakeholders from New York City and NYCHA management. But even more necessary are the on-the-ground knowledge and experience of residents. Resident leaders from grassroots organization Community Voices Heard (CVH) have been instrumental in working to ensure NYCHA residents' voices are heard and that attention is brought to conditions in public housing through door-to-door engagement, public meetings, and community organizing. RPA's recommendations for improving NYCHA would not have been possible without this partnership and the input from residents, many of whom have knowledge and experience which stretches back decades.

As part of this process of resident engagement, CVH gathered several meaningful insights into how NYCHA's living conditions impact the physical and mental well-being of residents. These insights have directly informed both CVH's ongoing efforts as well as RPA's recommendations for changes in property management, services, and engagement. A necessary starting point of any effort to repair NYCHA needs to be engagement with residents and an acceptance of their experiences as authentic — far too often this is not the case.

INTRODUCTION

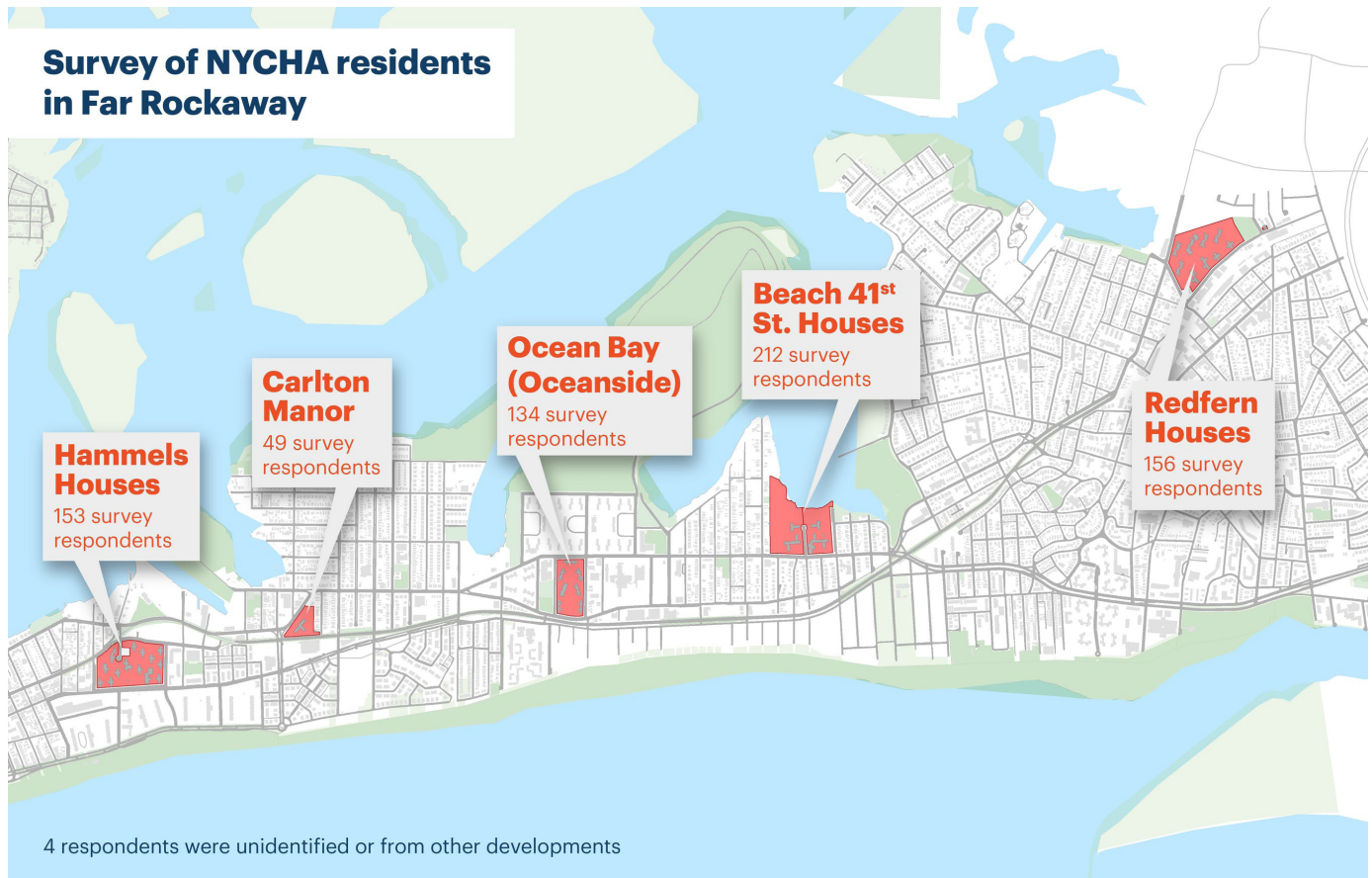
This is one of the most comprehensive efforts to document what residents are experiencing everyday in public housing on an individual level.

As a result, this survey identified important findings regarding NYCHA conditions on physical and mental health, as well as management responsiveness and building conditions.

The injustice of the health impacts on the people living in public housing cannot be overstated. Buildings can be restored. Thousands of privately-owned buildings which were uninhabitable in the 1970s and 1980s in New York are now fully renovated, safe, and healthy places to live. But a person's health cannot be so easily restored. Neurological damage from lead poisoning will affect children their entire lives. Respiratory impacts from living long-term with mold or asbestos can be debilitating well beyond when

these conditions are remediated. The mental health impacts from the trauma of these housing conditions can stay with people for years. The extent of the health impacts on people as a condition of living in NYCHA found by this survey, as well as other experiences documented by residents, are incredibly disturbing, and a debt to the people affected that cannot be repaid.

“The living conditions in NYCHA buildings are simply inhumane,” says Vernell Robinson, Community Voices Heard board member and a NYCHA resident. “The toxic environment is destroying the health of our communities, which are largely Black and Brown residents. We’ve been speaking out about our plight for years — decades — and NYCHA management just doesn’t seem to care. We are proud to have conducted this survey and worked with RPA on this important report exposing the truth about NYCHA living conditions. NYCHA can no longer turn a blind eye to this blatant injustice. I am committed to ensuring that the voices of public housing residents are heard and that we get the care we deserve.”



Surveying NYCHA Residents

Throughout 2018, CVH leaders—all of whom were living in public housing—conducted a comprehensive survey of NYCHA residents in Far Rockaway. This included more than 700 face-to-face conversations at five different developments.

COVID-19 AND THE HEALTH OF NYCHA RESIDENTS

The surveys in this report were done over the course of 2018, and this report was finalized in February of 2020 — just before the current COVID-19 pandemic hit. It is now obvious that COVID-19 greatly exacerbates the negative health effects, especially respiratory effects, already experienced by many NYCHA residents due to dilapidated building and apartment conditions.

While there is a lot we still don't know about COVID-19, we do know several things: COVID-19 is more dangerous to the elderly, people with pre-existing health conditions, and people living in environments which can cause respiratory issues. These populations are all disproportionately represented in NYCHA. The severity of COVID-19 also reflects existing inequities — RPA's own research has shown that deaths from COVID-19 are highly correlated with communities of color.

This is starkly illustrated on the Rockaway peninsula in particular, with the predominantly Black and Hispanic 11691 zip code on the eastern end of the peninsula having a death rate almost 6 times higher than the heavily White 11697 zip code on the western end of the peninsula.

This needs assessment, and the door-to-door survey which informed it, further illustrates the disturbing findings as to the health impacts of the conditions at NYCHA. These health impacts are fully avoidable with proper maintenance and decent living conditions. It is unconscionable that we are not prioritizing these improvements, which could greatly improve the underlying health of NYCHA residents.

This is especially true now of conditions which lead to respiratory health effects, like mold and asbestos. For instance, 1 in 3 residents surveyed who said they had mold in their apartments report respiratory issues as a result. Detrimental health effects are a direct result of inaction, and a vastly unjust consequence of living in NYCHA housing currently. Pressing “pause” on fixing NYCHA is not only a bad policy, it is a deadly one.

While we cannot yet cure COVID-19, we can help mitigate the conditions that cause underlying health effects which can amplify its effects, and reverse the inequities which lead it to be more deadly. This report is meant to highlight the urgency with which we need to bring better conditions to NYCHA, because not doing so has a direct effect of the health of hundreds of thousands of residents. The current epidemic accelerated these detrimental health impacts in a terrible way. It is more urgent than ever to address them immediately.



Photo: Ocean Bay (Oceanside) by Tdorante10

Focusing on the Health and Safety of NYCHA Residents

Buildings can be restored. Thousands of privately-owned buildings which were uninhabitable in the 1970s and 1980s in New York are now fully renovated, safe, and healthy places to live. But a person's health cannot be so easily restored.

SURVEY RESULTS

Over the course of 2018, several CVH members engaged in an extensive door-to-door survey documenting health and living conditions. This effort reached more than 700 people across 35 buildings in five developments in the Rockaways, and residents spent over 400 hours in this effort. This is just one example of the time and effort residents have gone through in order to bring attention to the deteriorating conditions and their effects on the everyday lives of people who live in NYCHA.

The findings are stark:

- ▶ 81 percent of residents need immediate repairs to their apartments, with more than half needing bathroom repairs and 45 percent needing kitchen repairs.
- ▶ One-quarter of residents say that living conditions directly affect their physical health, with residents experiencing conditions ranging from asthma and other respiratory issues to central nervous system problems and chronic fatigue.
- ▶ One-third say that living conditions directly affect their mental health, adding greatly to stress, depression, and other issues.



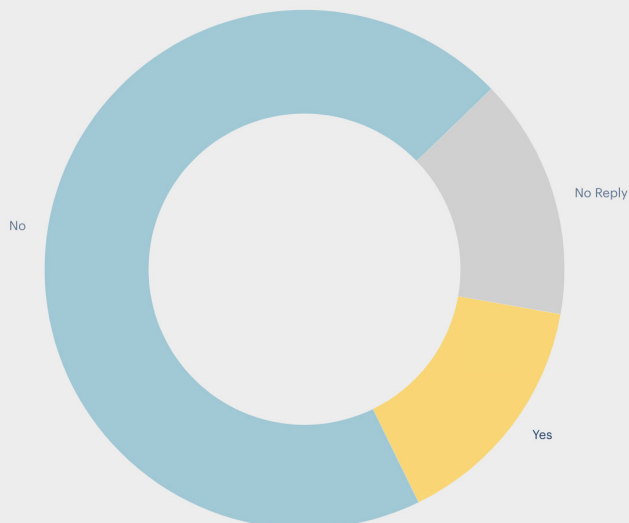
Photo: Jim Henderson | Quote: Andrew, Hammel Houses

Building Conditions

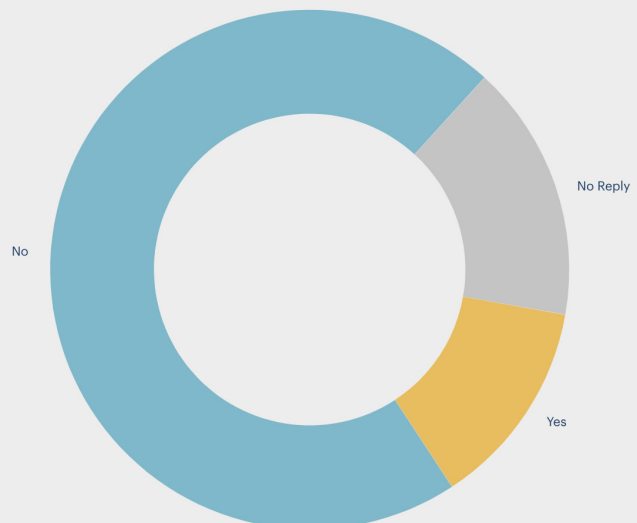
Lead and Asbestos

The survey specifically asked residents about knowledge of lead or asbestos in their apartments, with 15 percent of respondents replying they were aware of lead, and 13 percent of asbestos.

Are you aware of lead in your apartment?



Are you aware of asbestos in your apartment?



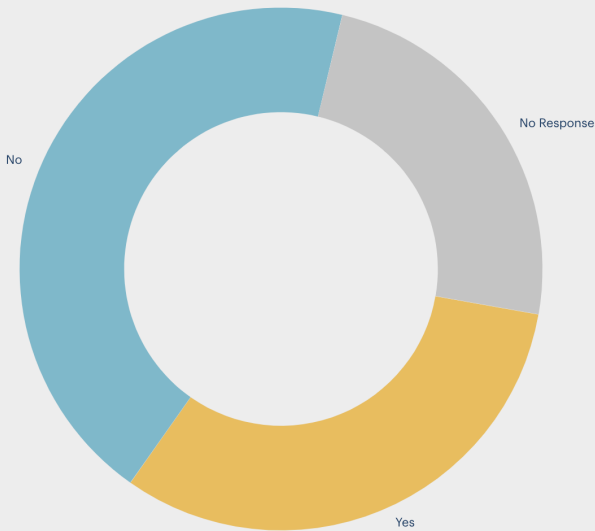
"There is paint peeling on the ceiling in the bathroom and on the wall in the bedroom, the toilet is constantly leaking in the bathroom, the water from the kitchen faucet smells. The building's lobby smells like mold."

—Shannette, Hammel Houses

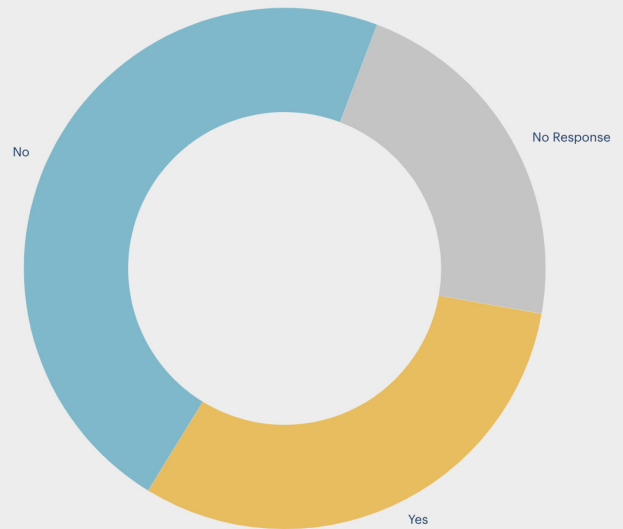
Mold and Leaks

The survey also asked about leaks and mold in apartments, with 31 percent of residents responding that they have had leaks, and 32 percent responding that they have had visible mold.

In the last year, have you had visible mold in your apartment?



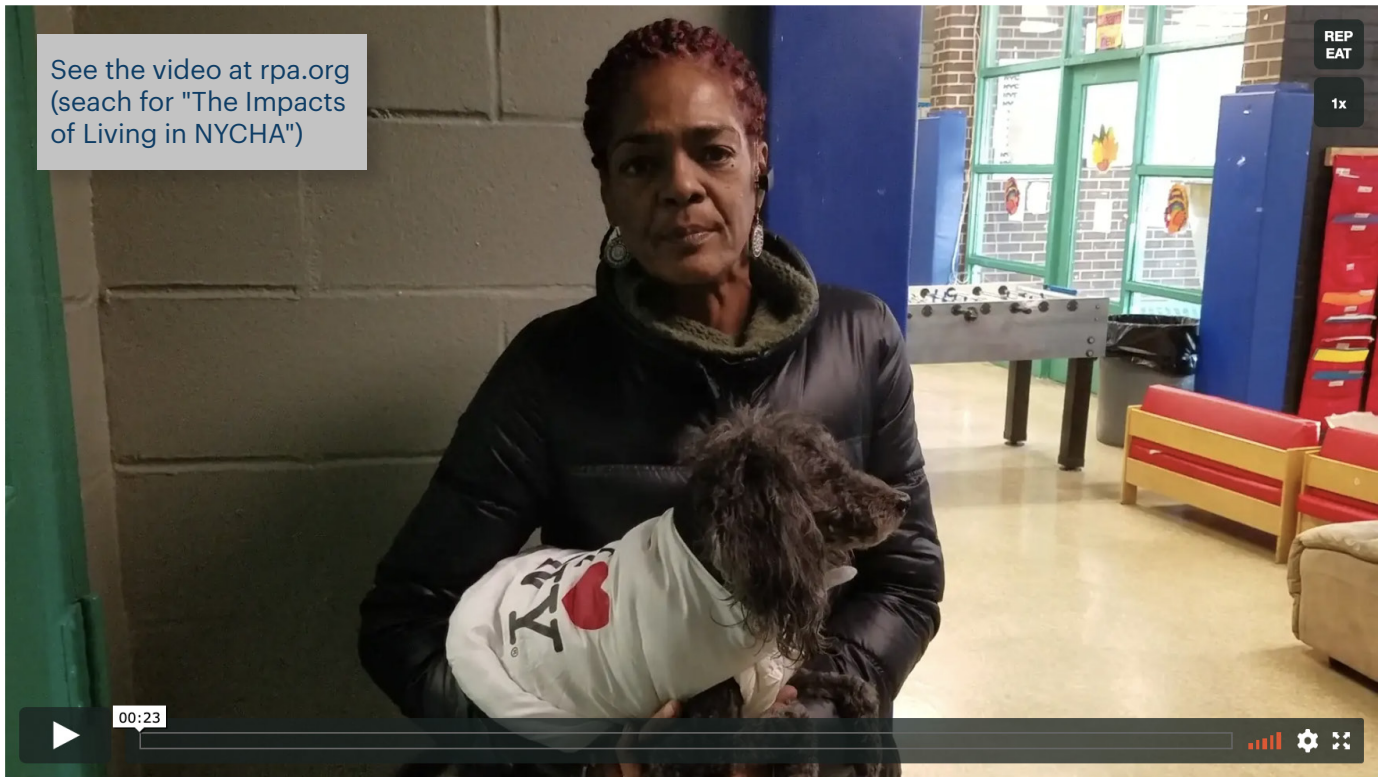
Have you seen moisture or leaks in your apartment in the last year?



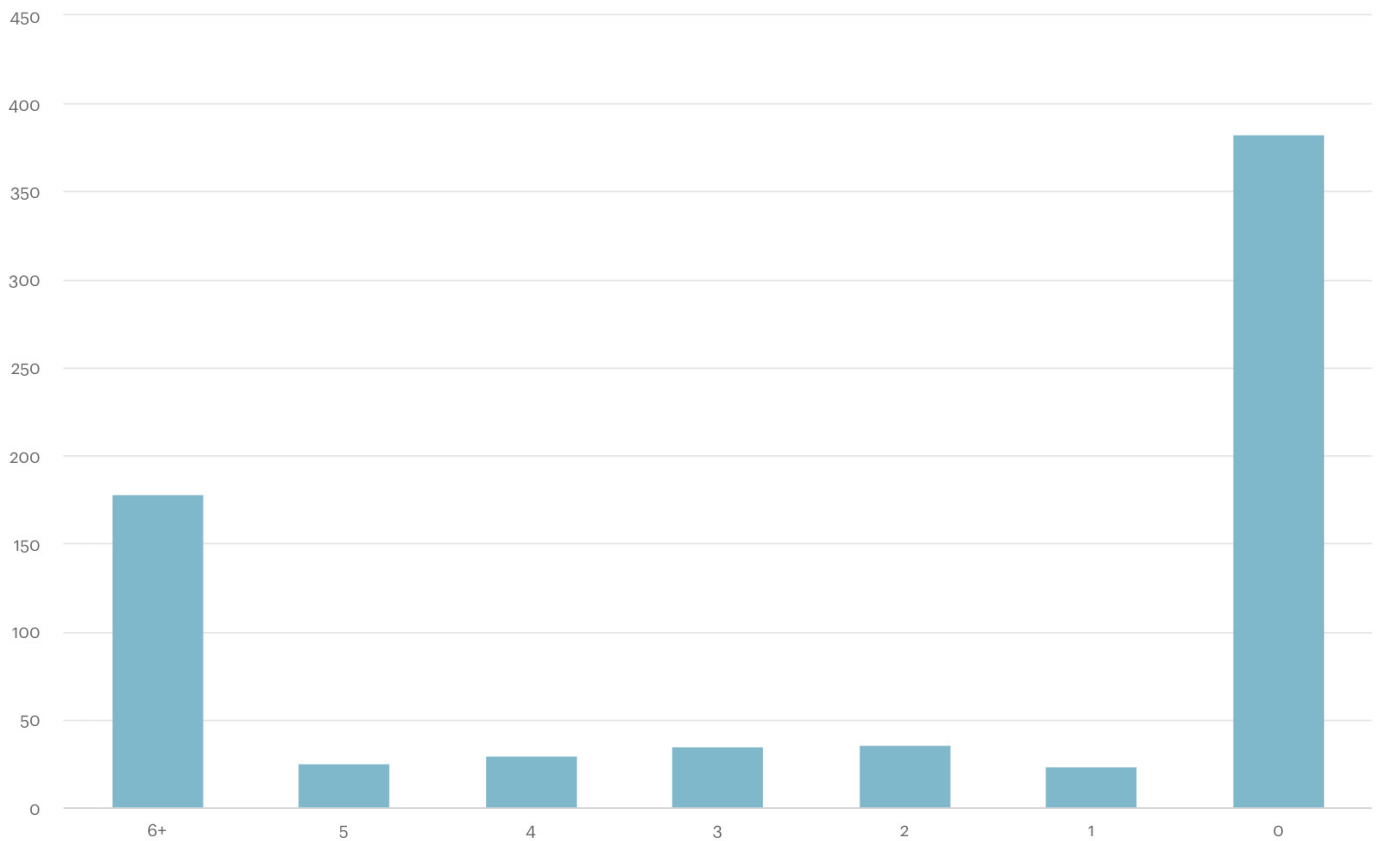
"The lobby, hallway, and stairway are regularly not kept clean, the elevator isn't working, the building is always flooded with sewage."

—Diane, Redfern Houses

Frances, a resident of Beach 41st St Houses, describes undrinkable water coming from the faucet in her apartment.



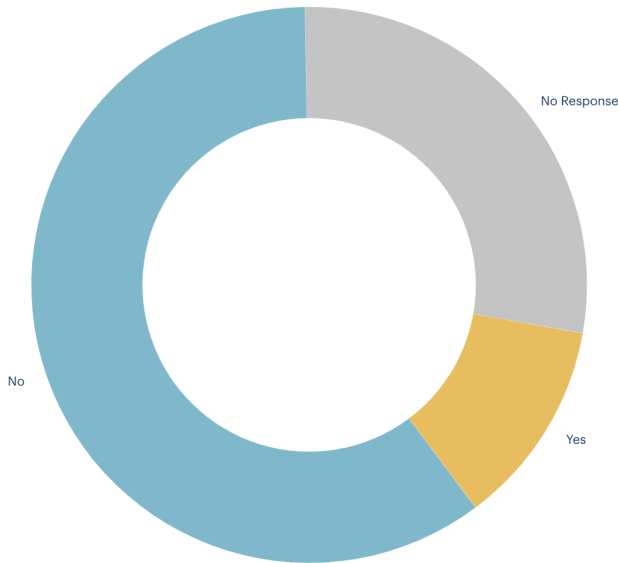
How many times have you lost heat or hot water in the last year?



Heat and Hot Water Loss

The survey documented heat and hot water loss over the last year, with more than one-quarter of respondents responding that they had lost heat and/or hot water six or more times over the past year. 12 percent of the time this led directly to physical health impacts.

Have you gotten sick after losing heat or hot water?



An Overwhelming Need for General Repairs

81 percent of residents responded that their apartment needed basic repairs or maintenance, ranging from painting and plastering, to kitchen and bathroom repairs and extermination. Numerous problems with buildings and grounds were noted at every development as well.

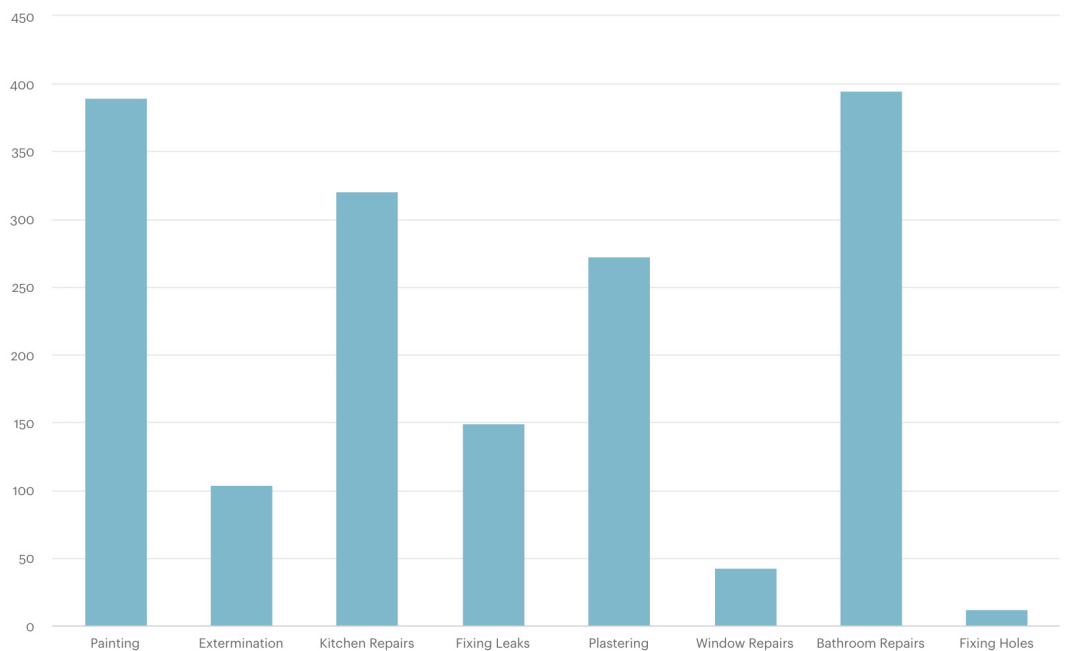
Are there other repairs currently needed in your apartment?



"All of the rooms have paint peeling on the walls and ceilings, the bathroom has mold on the wall and ceiling, the pipes are leaking in the kitchen and bathroom, there's electrical switch damage in the kitchen, the exhaust fan in the bathroom needs to be repaired."

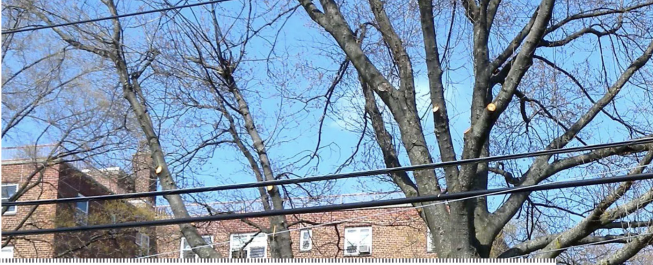
—Diane, Redfern Houses

What types of repairs do you need?



Management Responsiveness

The survey sought residents' experiences with NYCHA management's responses to these, and other, concerns. 41 percent of residents had problems with NYCHA management. It is also noteworthy that this question had the highest rate of "no response" of any of the survey questions, indicating a possible reluctance on the part of residents to identify problems they may have had with management.



"I take off from work — maintenance doesn't come — my job is at risk."

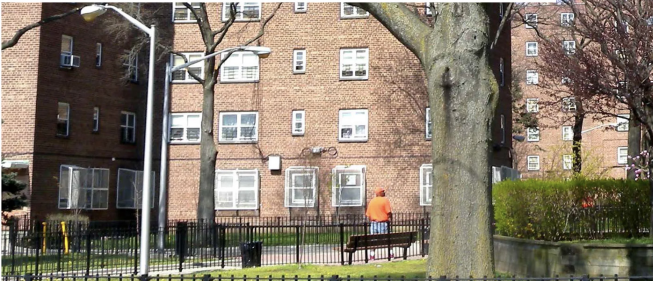
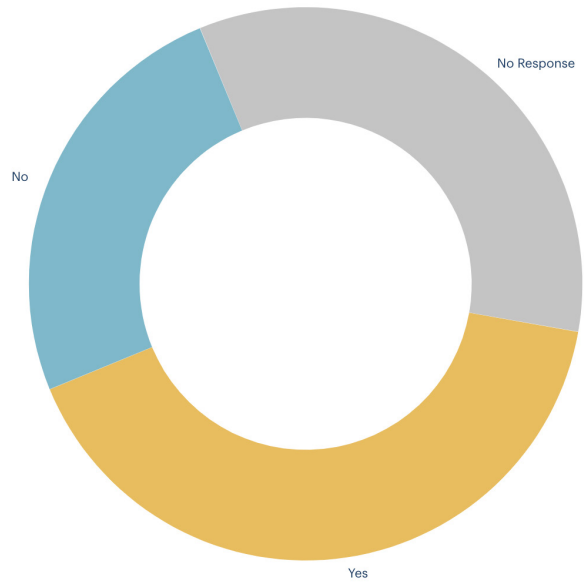


Photo: Jim Henderson | Quote: Jennifer, Redfern Houses

Have you had problems with management in your development?



Shema, a resident of Hammel Houses, describes the third time her apartment has flooded since 2017.



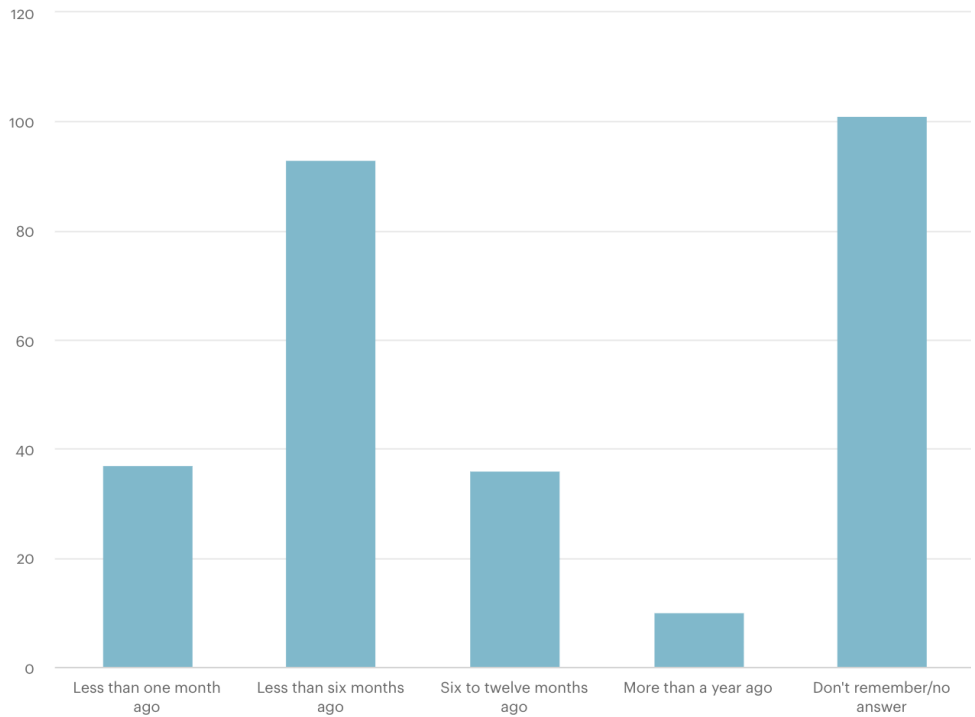
Marcia, a resident of Ocean Bay (Oceanside), describes the slow and inadequate responses from building management.



Incorrectly Closed Tickets

The willingness of management to incorrectly close out “tickets” (requests for repairs) was noteworthy, with 39 percent of residents reporting that management had closed out a ticket due to a resident not being home, when they were in fact home. It should be noted that due to constrained windows of availability, residents often have to take off work or cancel other obligations in order to be home and give access for repairs. Residents who had tickets incorrectly closed were asked when this had last occurred.

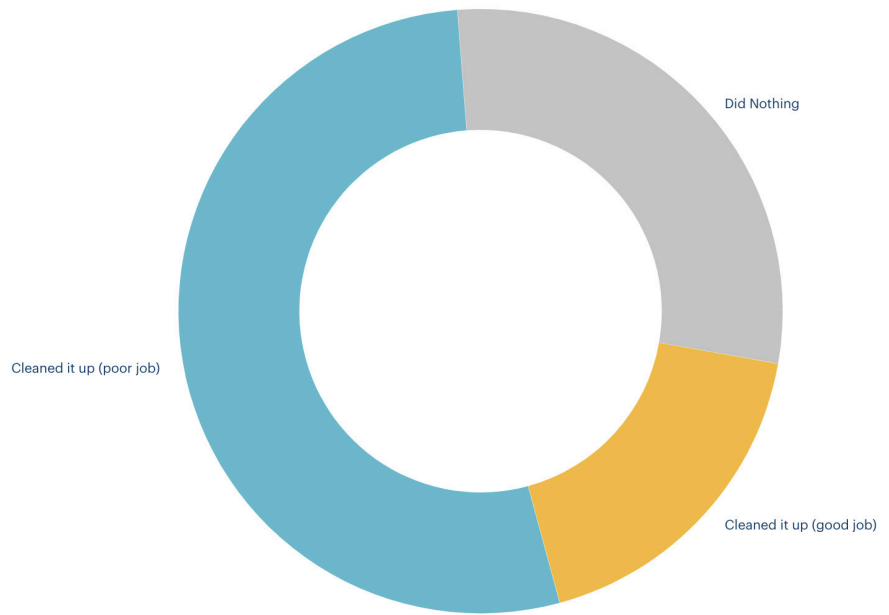
When was the last time you had a ticket closed allegedly because you were not home, when you were in fact home?



Addressing the Mold Problem

The survey specifically asked residents' experiences with mold cleanup if they indicated that they had had mold in their apartment and had reported it to NYCHA management. Only 18 percent were happy with the job NYCHA had done with mold remediation. More than half of the residents (53 percent) were unhappy with the cleanup job, with many reporting that the mold returned shortly after. 29 percent indicated that NYCHA had done nothing at all, with many taking it upon themselves to try and fix the condition.

What has NYCHA done to help address the mold problem?



"There was more than one terrible job done in my apartment—they have no respect that I have a job and can't keep taking off for their employees to not do decent work."

—Shema, Hammel Houses

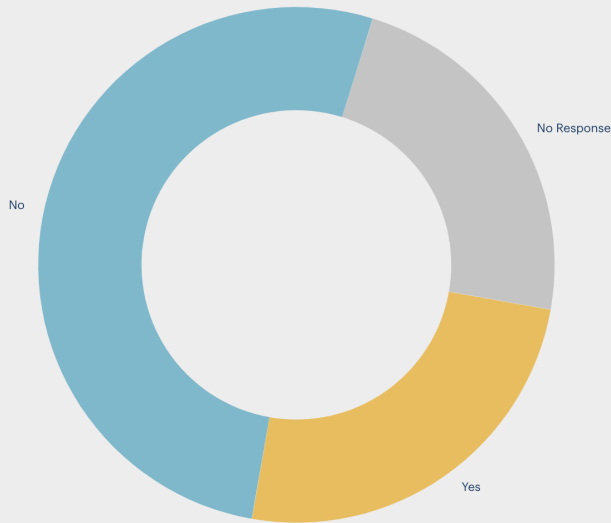
Danielette, a resident of Hammel Houses, describes unresponsive management in her building.



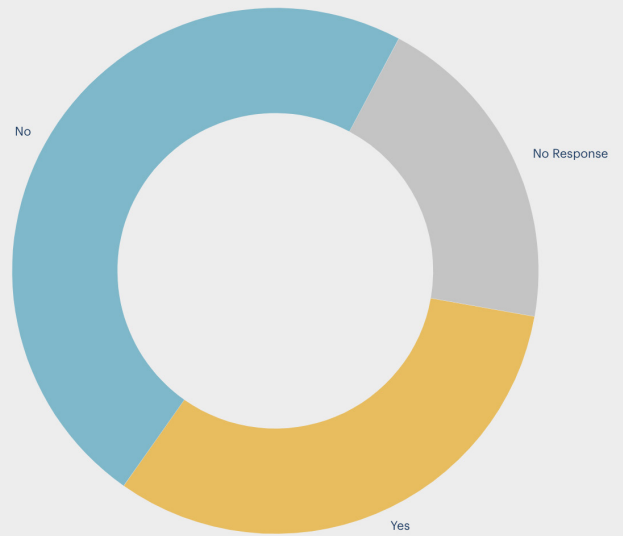
Management Responsiveness

Some of the most significant findings from the survey are the health impacts of these conditions. One-quarter of the residents surveyed said that living conditions had impacted their physical health, and almost one-third said that it had impacted their mental health.

Have the living conditions in your home/building or development impacted your physical health?

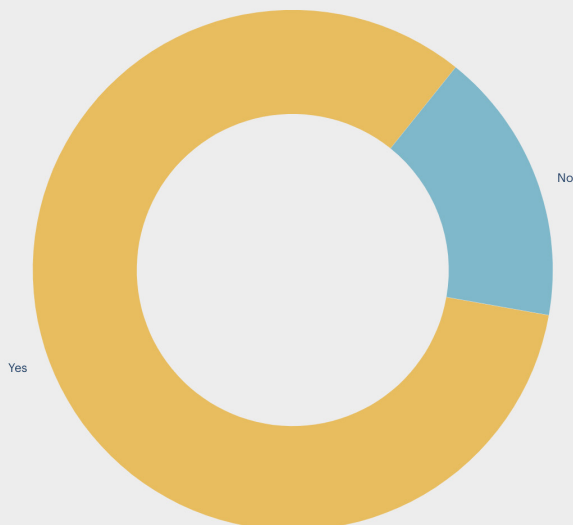


Have the living conditions in your home/building development impacted your mental health?

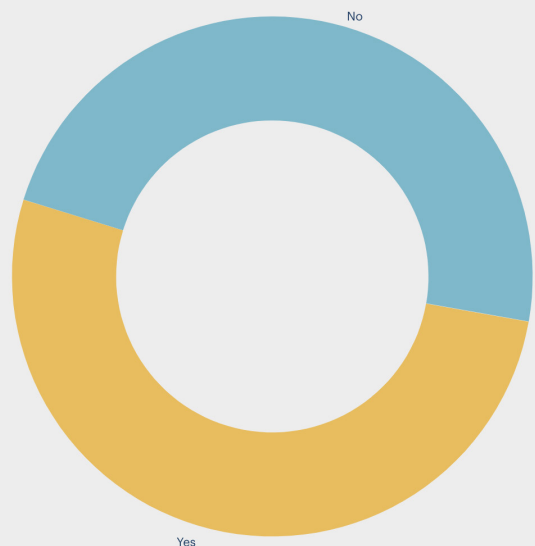


More than half of respondents who had mental health impacts from living conditions said that they had experienced increased depression, and more than 80 percent said they had experienced increased stress.

Have you experienced added stress?



Have you experienced depression?



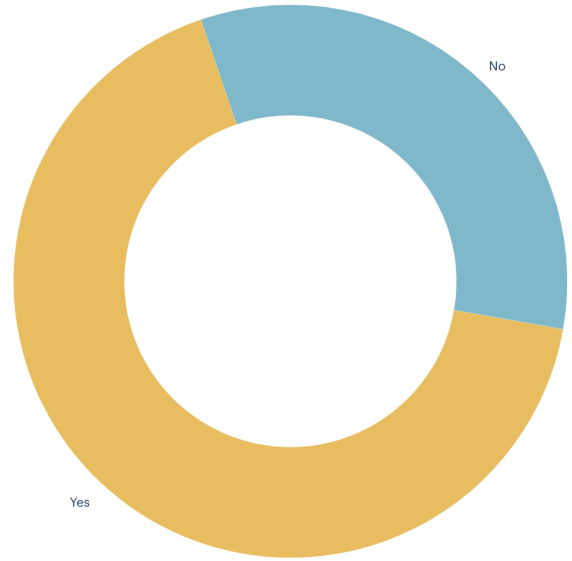


“(I have) stress, depression, living here is unbearable. Please help.”



Quote: Allen, Hammel Houses

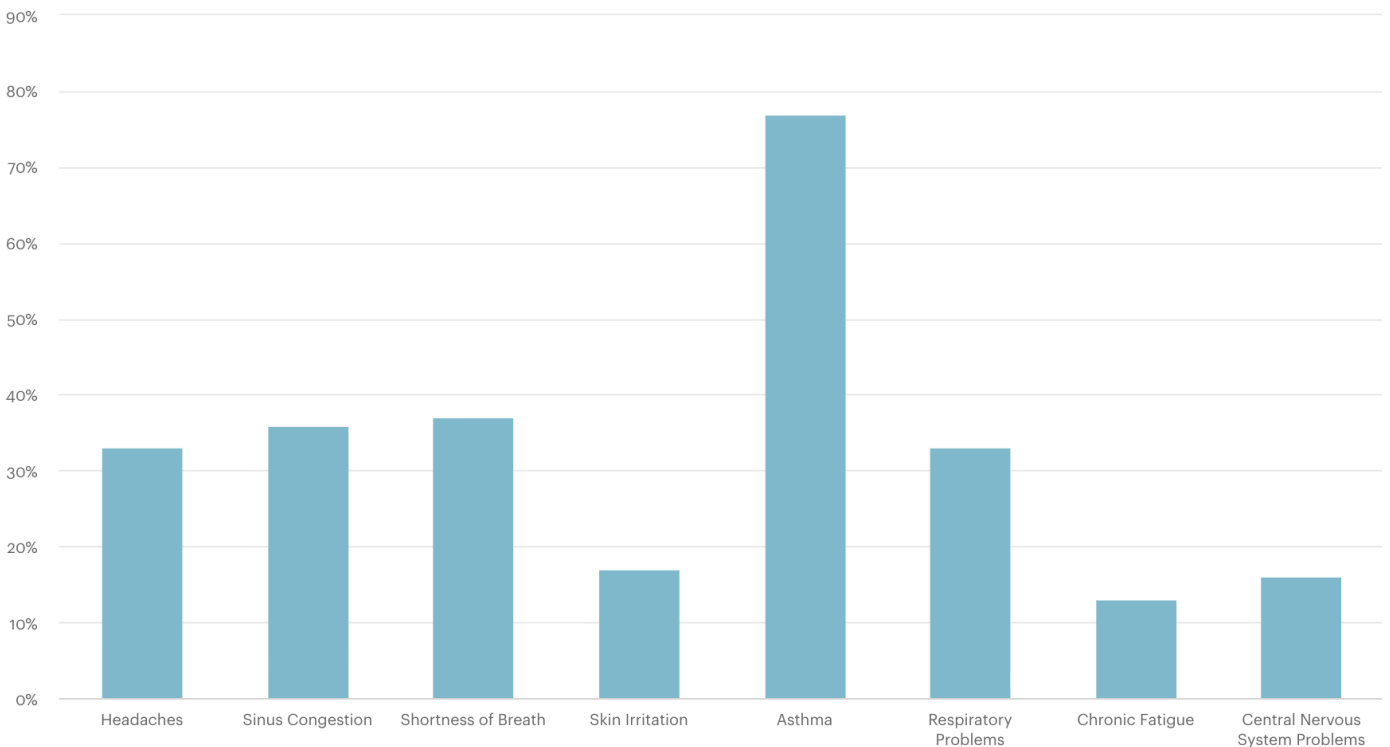
If you have mold, have these conditions impacted you or members of your family's health?



Mold and Physical Health

The physical health effects of these living conditions were also significant. Two-thirds of respondents who had mold in their apartments reported that these conditions had affected their physical health, or the physical health of a member of their family, with asthma being the most common condition.

If mold has impacted your health or your family's health, what have you or your family members experienced?



Fundamentally, NYCHA residents simply need the same things as residents of all other housing: homes and buildings in good repair, and safe and healthy living conditions.

At this point, however, it will be a major effort to achieve these standards. Virtually every public housing building needs a comprehensive renovation requiring significant investment. RPA, CVH, and several other organizations have suggested paths toward financing and effecting this larger effort, including calling for each level of government to work together to fully fund NYCHA repairs.

However, more immediate reforms can also be done. Residents have a right to management that is punctual, respectful, and responsive.

In addition to the survey in the Rockaways, CVH's roundtables and organizing meetings found numerous issues with the way NYCHA approaches its complaint system, property management, and capital planning.

Complaint Systems

NYCHA's centralized call system, covering more than 400,000 residents across five boroughs, is clearly not working from a resident perspective.

Complaints with the centralized call system are myriad, including dispatchers not knowing where to refer residents, requests getting lost or incorrectly notated, and incorrect times being given for repairs.

More autonomy and responsiveness at the local level is greatly needed, with training and dispatch authority given to individual developments. When CVH toured the NYCHA call center, they noted that frustration is not just on the residents' part, but that not being able to direct people to correct services and help improve conditions also leads to a great deal of frustration on the part of call center employees.

The inability to get responses to emergency conditions is also a large problem with the system. Residents noted that the centralized complaint center was not able to handle emergencies well, and that access to the emergency NYCHA service line was not made available to all residents.



2019 promotional video from NYCHA's Customer Contact Center (CCC)

Doubly frustrating is that NYC already has a professional complaint system for city services with the 311 system. This is the service used for all other housing complaints in NYC, and also helps document and analyze issues.

Siloing NYCHA from the 311 service does a disservice both to NYCHA residents and NYC overall.

One bright spot has been the MyNYCHA app.



NYCHA does have two in-person drop-in centers, one near Fordham Road in The Bronx and one near Atlantic Center in Brooklyn. However, the survey showed that these were not well known or utilized — likely because very few people in NYCHA live near these centers. Only 616 NYCHA apartments, or 0.4 percent of the total, are within a 10-minute walk of one of the drop-in centers. Only 6,363, or 3.7 percent of all NYCHA apartments, are within a 20-minute walk.

With a move toward a less centralized complaint system, there are some aspects of the current system which are important and should be retained. These include the documentation of the complaint with registered ticket number, and a uniform experience in customer service — albeit a much better experience than currently exists.

Property Management

The first steps to better property management is believing residents' reports of needed repair, and respecting residents' time and schedules.



Accountability to Residents

Longtime residents, those who have lived in NYCHA for more than 20 years, point to a property management system which was stronger when development level managers had more authority and felt a stronger sense of responsibility and accountability to residents. Extended hours for maintenance calls would also be valuable and allow for more flexibility for residents, as long as it resulted in quicker and better repairs.

If a problem is reported, the first person to respond should be someone who can fix the problem as reported. Instead, residents report that NYCHA will often send someone first to validate a problem. This is not only inefficient and costly, it is insulting.

Residents also point to very little advance notice is given to residents for scheduling repairs, in some cases as short as next-day notice. This results in an inability to take off work or rearrange other obligations in order to be home for a repair appointment. Residents also report a disconnect between the call centers and the property management offices. Oftentimes, the window of time given for an appointment by the call center is not communicated to or not accepted by the management office. This results in missed appointments, which are blamed on residents not giving access, or continual rescheduling resulting in even more time needed to be taken off from work or other obligations.

NYCHA also needs to do more on providing better language access for non-English speakers in developments, and invest in a management training and evaluation system that prioritizes respect for residents.

Capital Planning and Repairs

Every five years, NYCHA is required to do a comprehensive Physical Needs Assessment (PNA) detailing conditions in each development and the cost of their repair. Although the PNA is on the website, it is not broadly advertised or understood. The first step to trust is transparency, especially when it comes to the conditions of individuals' homes. Individual documentation of the Physical Needs Assessment for each specific developments should be made easily available at that development. Lists of planned and needed repairs and renovations can be made more transparent, and regular meetings to address them which are open to tenants should be organized.

It is clear that residents need to be a more regular part of the conversation with NYCHA management at all levels.

In addition to just conversation, a concrete way for residents to influence decision-making concerning building repairs is needed.

To this end, direct access to specialized technical help, such as construction managers, elevator and plumbing technicians, engineers or architects with development experience, and design professionals would be invaluable. This would help residents understand the root causes of problems at their developments, and gain a sense of the actual capital needs and potential costs of repairs. In turn, this would allow residents to be better positioned to make proposals to NYCHA as well as the local, state, and federal government to secure necessary dollars and execute planned repairs and renovations.



Photo: Community Voices Heard

Even when conditions and problems are heavily documented through organizing efforts and brought to the attention of senior management, problems are not addressed and conditions remain the same. As a result, residents are forced to continually go to local elected officials and engage in organizing actions in order to meet concerns and needs.



Photo: Wally Gobetz

One example of the potential usefulness of direct access to specialized technical help comes from the Polo Grounds. Resident leaders documented leaks throughout the building and developed a comprehensive leak map to assist management with the best route to repair. While NYCHA promised to do an assessment, nothing was put in writing, and this promise was never followed up on. Access to a construction management firm, for instance, would have allowed residents to benefit from having professional help in this endeavor and present a report that they could then be used to make concrete demands for repairs, as well as give NYCHA a road map for a comprehensive solution to the leaks.

NEXT STEPS

While a long-term plan for NYCHA is desperately needed, we cannot lose sight of the everyday reality for residents

Conditions in public housing are consistently leading to impacts which spiral far beyond just apartment conditions. Health impacts from lead and mold exposure can stay with people for years if not lifetimes. Jobs can be lost because of the need to continually be home during working hours for repairs.

It is also clear that NYCHA needs to be at the center of an equitable recovery from COVID-19, which has hit our public housing residents extremely hard. The neglect of NYCHA has directly led to living environments which have exacerbated the effects of COVID. Any recovery program must not miss the chance to prioritize making NYCHA a healthy living environment once again.

As detailed in RPA's 2018 report NYCHA's Crisis: A Matter for all New Yorkers, NYCHA is also vital to New York's economy and neighborhoods. NYCHA residents hold more than 137,000 jobs, including more than 30,000 in the Health Care sector alone. They spend more than \$2 billion dollars a year, much of it supporting local businesses, and own hundreds of local businesses themselves. NYCHA developments house 121 senior centers, 126 pre-school and childcare facilities, and almost 200 acres of recreational open space. The deteriorated living conditions do

not just affect NYCHA residents, they affect thousands of other New Yorkers, dozens of neighborhoods, and the economy of our entire city.

NYCHA residents pay rent and have the right to expect safe and healthy living conditions and apartments in a state of good repair — the same as tenants in buildings owned by non-profit or private landlords.

Residents are not to blame for current conditions in NYCHA, and many have gone above and beyond what should be expected of tenants in trying to document and fix them.

The culprit is the broken compact between our local and federal governments, resulting in the underfunding of both operations and capital and inadequate management systems. Narratives which blame residents for the physical condition of buildings are not only incorrect, they are harmful in building the accountability and trust necessary to move forward with solutions.

In addition to the survey in the Rockaways, CVH's roundtables and organizing meetings found numerous issues with the way NYCHA approaches its complaint system, property management, and capital planning.





Regional Plan Association is an independent, not-for-profit civic organization that develops and promotes ideas to improve the economic health, environmental resiliency and quality of life of the New York metropolitan area. We conduct research on transportation, land use, housing, good governance and the environment. We advise cities, communities and public agencies. And we advocate for change that will contribute to the prosperity of all residents of the region. Since the 1920s, RPA has produced four landmark plans for the region; the most recent was released in November 2017. For more information, please visit rpa.org or fourthplan.org.

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