

184 ELDRIDGE STREET NEW YORK NY 10002 212–453–4555 UNIVERSITYSETTLEMENT.ORG Testimony of University Settlement before the New York City Council

Joint Oversight Hearing: "Doors, Locks and Lights: the Infrastructure of Resident Safety at NYCHA"

Committee on Public Housing, Chair Alexa Avilés, Committee on Aging, Chair Crystal Hudson

> Submitted by Rohan Lalla, Case Manager, University Settlement

> > November 30, 2023

Chair Avilés and Chair Hudson, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

My name is Rohan Lalla, and I am a case manager with University Settlement Project Home, a non-profit organization that offers anti-eviction, and homelessness prevention services, and housing counseling to low-income residents.

My organization works with countless NYCHA residents living in Manhattan and Brooklyn who are struggling with housing issues, such as rental disputes and arrears; lack of repairs; and safety and infrastructure problems. NYCHA needs to take urgent action to improve its physical conditions which threaten its residents' safety daily.

We work primarily in the Lower East Side, Fort Greene, and East New York. NYCHA residents across these neighborhoods are concerned with the state and upkeep of their buildings: the lights in the hallways flicker, the elevators are often broken down, entrance doors don't lock to keep trespassers out. These conditions gravely imperil tenants, especially those who are elderly and disabled. NYCHA, unfortunately, has proven to be unresponsive and understaffed with regard to repairs and tenant complaints, a situation that should be blamed on both underfunding and mismanagement.

Not only do the state of public and shared spaces in NYCHA developments make tenants unsafe, so do the conditions in NYCHA's individual units. My colleagues and I have seen NYCHA drag its feet on repairs that threaten health and safety.

I have personally interacted with NYCHA residents who live with severe health hazards in their apartments daily. One of my clients, a disabled amputee residing with her two daughters who are both disabled as well, lives in Breukelen Houses in East New York. She has been living in a unit that tested



184 ELDRIDGE STREET NEW YORK NY 10002 212-453-4555 UNIVERSITYSETTLEMENT.ORG positive for toxic levels of asbestos in September. NYCHA has continually delayed the scheduled repairs and apartment transfers for this family.

Another family in Vladeck Houses in Lower East Side, two elderly retirees, have had a severe mold issue in their apartment since September. Again, no action has been taken besides inspections. Photos show the entire ceiling covered in mold, garbage piles right outside of the couple's window, and a severe leak with rancid water leaking through the door. NYCHA has failed to do root cause repairs, forcing the couple to move out of the unit and live with their daughter while still paying rent to the Housing Authority.

These are anecdotal cases that I have witnessed and advocated for. Aggregated data details a larger, systemic problem. The Ombudsperson Call Center (OCC), a court-appointed group formed to assist residents for leak and mold complaints that were not being adequately addressed or resolved by NYCHA, has participated in 67,000 calls with NYCHA residents since 2019. Between 2022 and 2023, the OCC averaged 234 new mold and leak complaints per month, 50% of which were classified as severe conditions. The average days to resolve resident-reported complaints to the OCC, again, 50% of which were severe conditions, ranged from 168 days to 224 days. This was caused by recurrence failures, or inability to meet scheduled appointments, and craftsmanship, where NYCHA contractors and vendors failed to conduct root cause repairs, making it so that tickets had to be re-opened.

NYCHA residents are among the most vulnerable populations in New York City. The majority of our clients are low-income, minority tenants who receive public benefits. They form the constituency of many of members sitting on these committees, and they deserve better than what they are being given right now.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions or connect you with the families I support. You can reach me at: rlalla@universitysettlement.org