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Council Blames HA 'Mismanagement' In Elevator Death; GM: Staff Apathetic

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NOT JUST MONEY WOES: City Council Public Housing Committee Chair Ritchie Torres and Councilman James Vacca (right) condemn Housing Authority officials for maintenance conditions that led to the death of an 84-year-old tenant in December. 'This was not a result of disinvestment, this was pure mismanagement,' Mr. Torres said.

Blaming systemic failures for the death of a tenant in The Bronx caused by an elevator malfunction, Housing Authority officials said April 21 that they would change the agency's culture, streamline emergency-response procedures and discipline a half-dozen employees.

On Christmas Eve, 84-year-old Olegario Pabon suffered fatal injuries when he fell backwards after the elevator lurched upwards and trapped him in the doors. The incident occurred even though a tenant reported erratic behavior by the Bronx lift 90 minutes earlier. That followed an injury earlier in December when a resident's foot was trapped in an elevator at another complex for more than an hour before he was rescued by the FDNY.

'Failure and Indifference'

"The fatality at Boston Road Plaza, in my opinion, was the result of failure and mismanagement, and in the case of a few employees the outright indifference of the New York City Housing Authority," City Council Public Housing Committee Chair Ritchie Torres said during an oversight hearing. He added that while the agency was underfunded, its bureaucracy was still at fault for the elevator conditions. "This was not a result of disinvestment, this was pure mismanagement," he said.

Among the largest gaps identified last month by a Department of Investigation report commissioned after Mr. Pabon's death were that the priority code for the elevator service call was too low to prompt an immediate response, a call-center worker left her post

without notifying a supervisor, and there was no protocol for checking monitors that ensure brakes are functioning.

The HA released a series of changes April 15. That same day, an Elevator Mechanic Helper was found dead in an elevator machine room of the Coney Island Houses. A co-worker doing preventive maintenance found Igor Begun, 54, unconscious, the HA said. The cause of death is still under investigation.

'Prevent Future Tragedies'

General Manager Michael Kelly apologized for both deaths and said, "I take ownership of what happened, that I am in charge of making NYCHA safer, more secure and better in every way and I will do everything I can in my power to prevent this tragedy from happening in the future."

Mr. Kelly, who didn't learn of the incident until four days after it occurred, said the HA would inspect brake monitors during preventive maintenance, refine emergency-response codes, require elevator dispatchers to share their notes with mechanics, create a dedicated "skill group" of call-center workers who can respond to those concerns and enhance elevator training for service workers. Senior-level employees will dedicate a half-day each month to meet with front-line staffers.

Its buildings are subject to Department of Buildings codes, but the HA can perform its own inspections. It employs 503 people who maintain the 3,314 elevators citywide. The agency reassigned five

employees, and Ken Buny, the head of the elevator division, was “relieved of his day-to-day duties” monitoring building codes and inspections. He was replaced by Ivo Nikolic.

Low Morale Breeds Apathy

Mr. Kelly said the culture was beset by “a resigned attitude by a small few” and a feeling of powerlessness over decaying buildings, underfunding and short-staffing. “Over time, situations or conditions that are unacceptable become accepted because it’s been that way,” he said. “Low morale breeds indifference, contributing to unacceptable conditions, news-grabbing headlines and just one more reason for funding to be rolled back and public housing to be dismantled.”

Councilman James Vacca, whose district includes the central Bronx development where Mr. Pabon died, said that he knew the victim from tenant-association meetings and that the development had long been plagued by issues. He asked about the burnout.

“People have a job to do, they’re charged with a responsibility, but they’re indifferent?” he said. “They might have low morale for whatever reason they deem, but they have a job to do and if they don’t like it they can leave.”

Mr. Kelly said that the “vast, vast majority” are committed but there are “a few” who aren’t doing their job. The HA began to ensure that repairs are performed correctly and is working to share the importance of workers’ functions with the rank-and-file.

'A 9-to-5 Mentality?'

"Do we have too many people working in NYCHA who view their jobs as a 9-5 job, who punch in at 9 and can't wait to go home at 5, and that's the extent of their commitment?" the Bronx Councilman asked. "Do we actually have people who view their job that way?"

"Councilmember, I believe so," Mr. Kelly said.



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"That's frightening to me," Mr. Vacca replied

Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd, whose union represents HA employees, criticized the HA GM, saying morale was brought down by "dysfunctional management" and that the agency was "ready to explode."

"We've had two employees lose their lives in the last year due to safety issues at NYCHA," he said referring to Mr. Begun and Toni Jackson, a Coney Island Houses Caretaker, who was crushed in March 2015 by a faulty garbage hoist. "As well as residents.

“It’s a disservice to those employees who gave their lives to work there,” he continued. “Many employees, especially in the management offices, stay well beyond the end of the shift so that they can get their paperwork done.”

Need Some Supts.

Mr. Vacca said each building should have a Superintendent. “If there was an on-site Superintendent in this building, I think he would have closed the elevator down,” he said. “He would have called someone beyond a call center and he would have gotten the elevator shut down.”

Mr. Floyd said the HA should focus more on hiring at least 2,500 more employees and providing safety equipment. “This is not a one-building, 20-apartment tenement that you can have a super,” he said. “These are major complexes and you need staff.”

Local 237 is also fighting with the HA over a staggered-scheduling policy that would change the work hours for many of its 8,000 members who work in public housing. A Manhattan Supreme Court Justice recently issued a temporary stay until a May 11 hearing, though the HA recently said it may limit which workers are affected by the policy, according to Mr. Floyd.

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