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HA's Finances Better, But Concerns Persist About Elevator Maintenance

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CARING WITH TOO FEW CARETAKERS: Housing Authority Chairwoman Shola Olatoye May 19 admitted that public-housing developments lack enough caretakers. Under questioning by City Council Members, she said she is looking for ways to send more central-office staff out into the field. She hopes that this summer's FlexOps program will also provide enough workers to make more repairs and better maintain the grounds.

Shola Olatoye offered good news about the Housing Authority's beleaguered finances May 19, but continued to face heat from City Council Members over the state of repairs at the city's public-housing complexes.

Bronx Council Member Rafael Salamanca, a Democrat, pressed Ms. Olatoye, the Chairwoman and Chief Executive Officer of the HA, on repair issues after having visited the Morrisania houses in his district.

'Horrified by What I Saw'

"I was horrified by what I saw in terms of the lack of basic maintenance," Mr. Salamanca said. He described lightbulbs being replaced and cleaning done on the spot "because a Council Member was there."

Ms. Olatoye acknowledged that there was a staffing problem at some housing developments. At NYCHA buildings, there is one caretaker for every 87 units, she said.

The HA chair agreed that on-site supervisors needed to be held accountable for such maintenance problems, but said she was also seeking more resources for them.

Critics have been alarmed about the state of repair at city public housing developments in the wake of recent deaths. In November 2014, Akai Gurley was accidentally killed by rookie cop Peter Liang in a dimly-lit stairwell in East New York's Pink Houses. Late last

year, 84-year-old Olegario Pabon was killed on Christmas Eve when an elevator-brake motor failed and he received a fatal head injury.

‘Take Safety Seriously’

Ydanis Rodriguez, a Democrat representing Upper Manhattan, pressed Ms. Olatoye on the elevator problem, asking how well she believed they were currently being maintained.

The HA chair noted that the city’s public-housing elevators accommodate a billion rides a year.

“We take the safety of our residents incredibly seriously,” she said, adding that the HA’s \$100-million elevator budget was significantly higher than in years past. She noted that she’d hired elevator specialists to field resident concerns at the NYCHA call center.

The HA also appointed an interim director to create new elevator procedures and disciplined those involved with the December tragedy. Staff now call the Fire Department for any hazardous conditions, even when they’re reported during office hours and their own maintenance staff are available.

Need Newer Elevators

“I think from a capital perspective there’s no question that we have elevators that are dated,” Ms. Olatoye added. “When we utilize our capital dollars, and do major modernization efforts, elevators are

sometimes the things that we certainly include in that scope.”



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Queens Council Member I. Daneek Miller also raised concerns about upkeep at housing projects, including grass that he'd seen growing two feet high.

Ms. Olatoye said she makes unannounced site visits every Friday to catch such problems and sees mixed results. Though the Housing Authority has cut staff in its central office through attrition in recent months, she is looking for ways to encourage the best workers to head back to the housing developments.

She pointed to the Flexible Operations program—dubbed “FlexOps”—that’s due to start in June. The program, worked out with Teamsters Local 237, will allow current employees to volunteer for late-night and early-morning shifts. New hires can be assigned to those non-standard times. Ms. Olatoye aims for FlexOps participants to better maintain the grounds, among other tasks.

Finances Looking Up

Despite all the concern about repairs and maintenance, however, Ms. Olatoye had good news to report.

A year after the implementation of NextGeneration, the city's plan to right HA finances within a decade, the agency posted an \$8-million operating surplus this quarter, when a \$15-million deficit had been projected.

An unexpected boost in Federal Section 8 funds, along with the success of some NextGen strategies like special rent reminders, helped to flood the coffers. Ms. Olatoye also managed to trim more central-office jobs than expected through attrition.

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