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NYCHA, Local 237 Intensify Efforts To Improve Safety in Project Elevators | News of the Week

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7-9 minutes



PLAYING IT SAFE: At a Safety Symposium at the Johnson Houses Community Center June 29, leaders from NYCHA and Teamsters 237 celebrated their accomplishments in improving

workplace safety for employees. 'In order to have productive workers, they have to be safe,' said Gerald Nelson, the agency's Vice President of Public Safety (right).

New York City Housing Authority staffers, union leaders and top administrators came together to celebrate the agency's ramped-up efforts to improve workplace safety at the Johnson Houses Community Center in East Harlem June 29.

Awards were presented at the Safety Symposium to outstanding employees who have contributed to ensuring workers, known as Caretakers, operate under safe conditions, with about 150 NYCHA employees in attendance. In 2013, NYCHA and Teamsters Local 237, which represents 8,000 employees at the agency, began the SafeNYCHA program to combat a rising number of accidents.

Concern About Comp Cases

"The Authority and the local were trying to understand why there were so many Workers' Comp cases," explained Kevin Norman, director of the Housing Division at Local 237.

Last year, there were 908 workplace injuries, the lowest number since 1995.

As part of the program, safety congresses, or committees that report on safety issues, discuss how problems were resolved and look for solutions to prevent accidents from recurring. The seven congresses meet each month with NYCHA leadership, as well as with members of the union.

Alongside better reporting, making sure employees have proper

training—which ranges from working with the proper gear to knowing how to move through a crawl space—was also critical to improving workplace safety.

“Safety is key in NYCHA. In order to have productive workers, they have to be safe,” said Gerald Nelson, NYCHA’s Vice President for Public Safety.

Pinpointing Hazards

Ninety percent of the developments have a Safety Associate, who checks the grounds for potentially hazardous conditions, from rat-infested basements to patches of ice, Mr. Nelson said. There are 209 volunteer Safety Associates.

Mr. Norman said that different departments such as the Heating Division have approached the union to collaborate and improve their communication on safety issues.

“Especially the Elevator Division. They have made significant strides,” he said.

In the past few years, a series of tragedies occurred connected to NYCHA’s elevator-operations unit, which is responsible for maintaining the agency’s 3,286 elevators. On Christmas Eve in 2015, Olegario Pabon, an 81-year-old resident of the Boston Road Plaza Houses in the Bronx, stepped into an elevator that drifted upward, causing him to fall and crack his skull, resulting in his death.

Communication Glitches

In a report published in March of last year, the Department of Investigation revealed a “complete breakdown of communication

at every level” played a role in that fatality. Three days before the accident, a resident was stuck inside the same elevator. Less than two hours before the accident, a tenant called NYCHA’s command center to report that the elevator was going up and down by itself—but the worker did not call a mechanic. The DOI also found that NYCHA elevator mechanics were not required to inspect or report on the elevators’ brake monitors.



Last year in April, Igor Begun, an Elevator Mechanic Helper, died after being electrocuted while working in the Coney Island Houses’ elevator-machine room. The agency quickly stepped up its efforts to improve elevator safety, and that same month, Ken Buny, head of the elevator division, was fired. The elevator division also began a “Safety in Motion” campaign to establish better reporting and communication.

At the symposium, Bob Beale, an Elevator Mechanic and member of the Safety in Motion committee, said that the safety campaign is helping bridge a gap between the agency and the workers.

Bigger Kind of Security

“What good are a pension and a raise if you’re not healthy enough to enjoy it?” he said after holding a moment of silence for Mr. Begun.

Mr. Nelson said that thanks to the program, accidents have decreased and productivity has increased.

But there is still room for improvement.

“SafeNYCHA has helped us to identify segments of the membership that are particularly susceptible to injury, such as caretakers with less than five years of experience,” a spokesperson for Local 237 said.

First-year caretakers are the most likely to be injured on the job: they account for 7 percent of NYCHA’s workforce but 16 percent of injuries. The union and NYCHA plan to take steps to improve safety for new employees.

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