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# Tenant Activists Claim NYCHA Isn't Doing Enough to Avert Project Fires | News of the Week

*BOB HENNELLY*

14-17 minutes



THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: Maria Forbes is a tenant president with the Claremont Consolidated NYCHA apartments in the Bronx, which unlike three quarters of NYCHA's other projects, are combustible. She was so concerned about the tenement style apartments, she and other neighborhood leaders

opted to spend \$32,000 of their tenant appropriation on forming and equipping a Community Emergency Response Team, which she heads.

Four weeks after the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the recovery process for remains continues. So far, authorities have confirmed 80 people were killed in the public-housing fire, making it one of the deadliest blazes in Britain's history.

### **Tenants Left on Own**

The fire has prompted a national conversation in Britain about the failure of the local housing authority, municipal officials and even the national government to heed warnings from local tenant groups at the site. Questions about efforts to privatize public housing and government cost-cutting have also been raised.

After the blaze, residents told reporters that they were alerted to the fire not by any alarm or public-address system, but by passersby and neighbors or their own household smoke detectors.

For years Grenfell Action Group, a local tenants-advocacy group, had warned on its website that the property was a potential firetrap. In a November 2016 blog post entitled "Playing with Fire," the group predicted that only "a catastrophic event" would "expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord...and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health-and-safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders."

The deadly London fire highlighted the importance to residents

of prior warning about how to respond if a fire breaks out. In the Grenfell case, residents were told to “shelter in place” because it was assumed by officials that existing fire doors would be sufficient to keep a fire contained. That turned out to be a tragic miscalculation.

That London tragedy prompted City Council Member Elizabeth Crowley, chair of the Fire and Criminal Justice Committee, and Council Member Ritchie Torres, to call for hearings to study whether there were applicable lessons for the Housing Authority.

### **1 in 4 Combustible**

According to the FDNY, high-rise HA projects composed of cinderblocks are fireproofed, which keeps fires contained in the residential unit where they start. In such a setting, staying in an apartment that is not on fire is the best advice and indeed, venturing out into a hallway can prove deadly.

In the event of a fire in a building that is made of combustible material, residents are urged to waste no time in evacuating. Under existing city code, every apartment is supposed to have that information affixed to the back of the front door.

According to the HA, 25 percent of its buildings are combustible.

The authority has historically suffered from billions of dollars of underinvestment in maintenance and deferred upgrades. Its problems with the maintenance of elevators and basic emergency lighting are regular tabloid fare. Last year, after the death of an 84-year-old man in an elevator in a NYCHA Bronx project, a report by the city's Department of Investigation found “significant flaws” in how the agency responded to high-priority

complaints about elevator breakdowns from residents.

When Mayor de Blasio was asked late last month about potential lessons that the city might learn from London, he was pretty sanguine. “I think we have a very different situation here, I really do. I think New York City’s Building Code is superior, and I think we have more fire-retardant buildings for lots of reasons,” he said. “[Fire Commissioner Daniel] Nigro, right after the fire, was quick to tell me that there is a very different reality here. That being said, of course, we should look at everything.”

Several tenant leaders from throughout the NYCHA system told this newspaper that they felt that one link between the situation in London and New York City was a “disconnect” between the officials who run the system and the residents. They welcomed the Council’s plan for fact-finding hearings about the status of fire preparedness at NYCHA properties.

### **‘NYCHA Doesn’t Listen’**

Maria Forbes is one of the tenant presidents who oversees the Claremont Consolidation project in The Bronx that includes several hundred units in combustible six-story structures.

“NYCHA does not listen,” said Ms. Forbes. “They don’t respond quickly when we have issues. Attention is going to the high-rises. I moved in here in 1985 and by 1988, thanks to the crack epidemic, people had stripped every bit of fire alarms, anything made of metal to sell out of these units, and a lot of that has yet to be repaired. And as for the fire escapes at Claremont Consolidated, half of them are broken, so I guess some people just won’t get out.”

She is also a team chief of her local Community Emergency Response Team, which works closely with the city's Office of Emergency Management. "We took our tenant-participation funds and spent \$32,000 to buy generators, blankets, emergency to-go bags," Ms. Forbes said.

"I have questioned the Office of Emergency Management on several occasions going back two Commissioners: when are you going to target as a drill scenario public housing like these consolidation lower tenement apartment buildings that are combustible? We know when we have a fire, it is going to spread. It is going to spread like wildfire, and it is going to destroy a lot of people and displace a lot of people."

An email query to OEM's press office brought no response by press time.

In a tour of Ms. Forbes's project, she showed a reporter a building where she said a three-year-old effort at a fire-alarm and sprinkler upgrade still required the around-the-clock presence of a fire-watch security guard because the system was unreliable.

### **NYCHA: Resolved Problem**

NYCHA confirmed that an inspection of that building indicated that a water-flow valve was defective, but said that the repairs had been completed last month and that the around-the-clock fire watch was being done as a precaution, pending a July 14 FDNY inspection, at which point the system would be back up and running.

Audrey Henry, another tenant president from Claremont,

complained that her combustible buildings at 1128 and 1113-1131 Findlay Ave. lacked critical hallway fire doors. “They were never put in, and the Fire Department came and told me that the doors need to be put in,” Ms. Henry said. “I spoke to the manager and he said he would look into it and that was 15 years now, and no one looked into it and we still don’t have doors.”

“Do you understand how ignored we are by NYHA, continuously saying they are broke but they hire 10 people who make over \$100,000? That’s a million dollars,” Ms. Forbes said. “That money should be put into fire doors. They are ignoring us.”

Tenant leaders in NYCHA’s Bronx combustible complexes also said they were concerned about the use of candles in apartments where tenants had their Con Ed service cut off due to lack of payment. In 2013 in The Bronx, in a non-NYCHA unit, the use of candles to illuminate an apartment where Con Ed had terminated service sparked a fire that killed three small boys: a 4-month-old, a 2-year-old, and a 5-year-old.

### **NYCHA: Unduly Alarmed**



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In a statement in response to tenants’ concerns, NYCHA said

that “nothing was more important than the safety of our residents, and we are currently surveying all of our buildings to identify additional ways to improve fire safety. The NYCHA community should know that the majority of our buildings are non-combustible and all apartments have smoke detectors. Additionally, we work closely with FDNY to educate our residents and employees on fire safety and what to do in case of an emergency.”

Every one of the addresses that tenants flagged as being problematic was passed along to NYCHA’s press office, which dispatched field teams to investigate. The agency committed to report back on what was found.

Residents’ skepticism about NYCHA is understandable. After an April 2016 fire in NYCHA’s Butler Houses that claimed the lives of an 18-month-old and a 2-year-old, tenants reported they did not hear smoke detectors go off. A review of the records of that apartment showed that just hours before, a NYCHA maintenance worker had been in the apartment and learned the smoke detector was broken, but checked off that it was working.

In a follow-up citywide audit, DOI found that in 106 out of 188 NYCHA apartments it checked, 56 percent were deficient in one or more of six critical safety items, “including numerous missing smoke and CO detectors and missing or damaged fire-safety notices.”

### **Cover-Up Negligence?**

“In comparing the available original work orders with DOI inspection results, investigators determined that in 29 percent of

apartments, NYCHA maintenance staff had failed to report that smoke or CO detectors were missing, damaged, or not functioning,” DOI reported. “At Butler Houses where the fatal fire occurred, DOI investigators found deficiencies in 70 of the 114 apartments they re-inspected—61 percent—and of 62 apartments where original work orders were available, NYCHA staff inaccurately reported that smoke alarms or CO alarms were functioning in 25 or 42 percent of apartments.”

“DOI has now found that NYCHA workers blatantly flouted basic precautions, supervisors failed to check on them, and tragedy was the result,” Commissioner Mark Peters said in a statement.

### **‘Raising Awareness’**

In the aftermath of the DOI report, “over the past year, NYCHA has taken action to raise awareness on fire safety with a campaign targeting both residents and employees,” a NYCHA press person responded in an email. “Launched last year, the 5 ALIVE campaign reminds residents of the simple do’s and don’ts in fire safety (NYCHA Fire Safety Tips for Residents) and employees on fire-safety operations and responsibilities (NYCHA 5 ALIVE for Workers).”

According to NYCHA, “When apartment repairs or inspections are performed, there are five quick items staff should check for, fix or install, and document”: the status of working smoke and carbon-monoxide detectors, window guards in apartments with children (except at fire-escape window exits), that there is a fire-safety notice posted on the back of the apartment door, testing the ground-fault circuit-interrupter outlets, and that all apartment



entrance doors are self-closing and latch.

To insure “accountability and verification...NYCHA has issued handheld devices to maintenance workers to streamline and improve the efficiency of real-time safety-check reporting and work-order processing,” the agency said in a statement.

“NYCHA will monitor Safety Spot Check data to identify poorly-performing developments so additional training and supervision can be provided—and, if necessary, disciplinary actions can be taken.”

### **‘Ask the Right Questions’**

Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd, whose union represents thousands of NYCHA workers, welcomed Council hearings into NYCHA’s fire preparedness. “City Council members only have to ask appropriate questions. NYCHA management and the de Blasio administration are equally responsible for NYCHA properties and tenant fire safety,” Mr. Floyd said in response to a query from this newspaper. “NYCHA residents deserve full and timely inspections by the city Fire and Building departments. Afterwards, NYCHA must be tasked with curing any and all violations. A public record should be maintained constantly and remain open to resident review noting all violations found, and the dates those violations are cured.”

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