

Testimony of Local 237 Housing Division Director Kevin Norman
New York City Council Committee on Public Housing and
Committee on Oversight & Investigations
Joint Oversight Hearing
February 6, 2018

Good morning, my name is Kevin Norman - Director for Housing Division members at Local 237 IBT. I am here today with my colleague Bertha Aiken, the Director of Training and Education at Local 237.

Prior to joining Local 237 almost 3 years ago, I worked for 25 years at the New York City Housing Authority starting in June 1990 and ending April 2015.

The first ten years of my career - including six as a caretaker, 3 as a heating plant tech and one as a maintenance worker - are uniquely relevant to today's hearing. The next fifteen years were a combination of civil service supervisory and middle management roles.

In each of these titles, civil service or appointed, I earned growing responsibility and proudly worked for residents of NYCHA at more than half of NYCHA's developments, including recently separated Forest Hills Co-ops and other privately managed NYCHA locations.

We are here today on behalf of President Gregory Floyd to willfully and accurately represent our members and their desire to serve these residents and to counter notions that we are not of one accord with the mission of the authority - which is to its residents first and foremost – and, as I remember, to provide safe, clean, and decent affordable housing despite recent rebranding for convenience.

For close two years now, I have attempted to use those years of service, experience, and interactions to improve the relationship between housing executives and leadership and Local 237 for the sole purpose of avoiding days like this for both the residents and our members.

The response has been some very token conversations, swipes at the contracts and promotional opportunities of our members as well as constant allegations that we are not flexible or have prohibitive costs. I can't understand how that statement doesn't resonate with residents that are one-third of the authority workforce. But I think one day it will add up.

Today's conversation about the egregious conditions that the residents endured during the so-called bomb cyclone should be a surprise to no one. Over the past 18 months, we have tried to speak to, educate and warn NYCHA officials that their practices may be flawed.

We know because the members ask us over and over "how are we supposed to provide service to the residents this winter when we don't have what we need?" Mother nature is undefeated NYCHA, and you need to rethink this.

Clearly some of the problems are not caused by the Housing Authority. Federal and other funding shortfalls are well documented for over a decade.

But NYCHA has decided for us all to be here today by not using, or supporting, its greatest asset – the workforce of Local 237.

There is no lack of potential resources in this case that is not the choice of the Housing Authority. It is unfair for anyone to imply such and contradicts the simple and expected premise of agency executives being strategic.

For almost two years, NYCHA had Local 237 in a holding pattern regarding the "best in class" training that we offer our members seeking promotion. At their request, to improve what they claimed were a lack of basic skills, was then changed to tool and technical skills and then morphed into high tech skills for new equipment, we paused training and started meeting with NYCHA.

We explored, suggested and offered every option to improve training, including restoration of an advanced program that the agency let die in 2009 that addressed advanced skills for heating staff and paid them \$6500 more, and was funded by Local 237 in perpetuity. But they said "no good."

We asked and got NYCHA to bring their training partners to the table from within the agency's own training unit, as well as the Department of Resident Empowerment and Economic Sustainability (REES).

REES cooperates with the external organization, testing and training residents for current employment opportunities with NYCHA. They facilitate training and staging hundreds of residents for hire at NYCHA. Still, NYCHA thought it was not a good enough idea and staff were not replaced as they left, with no plan to do so.

This summer they made intentions clear, telling us that privatizing 69 boiler plants was the answer. We reviewed the request and the industry standard and responded that we could do it at half the cost internally, including new hires and advanced training to stay current with incoming systems.

NYCHA responded in writing, “this is a service enhancement initiative, rather than a cost savings initiative.” It is impossible to argue the need for service enhancements to the residents, but it’s even harder to argue for this agency paying twice as much with fiscal restraints and getting the same or lesser result.

There are still many unanswered questions and requests that we have of NYCHA. We are available to answer yours of us at this time.