



LINDA B. ROSENTHAL  
Assemblymember 67<sup>th</sup> District

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ALBANY

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**Assemblymember Linda B. Rosenthal's Testimony Before the New York City Housing Authority on the Draft Public Housing Agency Plan for Fiscal Year 2022**

Good evening. I am Assemblymember Linda B. Rosenthal and I proudly represent the Upper West Side and Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan, which includes three New York City Housing Authority developments (NYCHA): Harborview Terrace, Amsterdam Houses and Amsterdam Houses Addition. I would like to thank Chair Russ for the opportunity to comment on NYCHA's Draft Public Housing Agency Plan (Draft Plan) for Fiscal Year 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic trained a bright light on the problems that have long plagued public housing residents. While millions of Americans began sheltering in the safety of their homes when COVID-19 hit many NYCHA residents simply did not have that luxury. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, NYCHA residents continued to battle the City over chronic, unaddressed leaks, mold, crumbling walls, non-existent elevator service and rat infestations. They managed this while simultaneously working and teaching their children from home or while struggling to find safe, affordable childcare so they could continue to work outside the home.

For instance, during the pandemic, a constituent who had been diagnosed with COVID-19, contacted my office because he had been sleeping on his living floor for six months after his bedroom wall crumbled. For years, NYCHA neglected to make repairs to my constituent's apartment, and a simple fix turned into a major problem as a result. Sadly, this situation is not unique.

As a result of mismanagement and prolonged financial disinvestment, the conditions at NYCHA developments throughout the City have deteriorated over the years such that living conditions in some developments are near-universally deplorable. NYCHA is in the midst of a deep financial crisis. Without an immediate infusion of significant capital, the squalid and unhealthy conditions that too many NYCHA residents contend with on a daily basis will only worsen and threaten the integrity of our nearly 200,000 units of public housing.

In recognition of the housing crisis unfolding across the country, the Biden Administration has responded by earmarking \$40 billion in funding for public housing authorities across the country in the forthcoming infrastructure plan. While this amount would represent a historic and long-overdue investment in our public housing, the money is not guaranteed and NYCHA, unless changes are made to the federal Capital Repair Formula, would not receive enough funding to address all of its outstanding issues.

To ensure that NYCHA receives its fair share of federal funding, the federal government must double that amount to \$80 billion. However, no matter how much is set aside for NYCHA, a one-time funding boost from a friendly presidential administration is not a viable solution for NYCHA's long-term financial health.

While I have deep concerns about NYCHA's Blueprint for Change (Blueprint), particularly in its current form, given NYCHA'S financial situation and the precariousness of federal funding, a plan that stakeholders agree on must be crafted on a set of guiding principles. First, it is imperative that it explicitly protects NYCHA against privatization efforts, and as I've previously discussed with Chair Russ, the Blueprint must enshrine the rights of NYCHA residents and carve out a clear role for them in shaping the process moving forward.

NYCHA must provide tenant associations with resources to consult with and/or retain their own attorney to review temporary relocation and access agreements when NYCHA is considering and making repairs.

**Community engagement must be prioritized to build trust and garner support from the NYCHA community:**

multiple town halls at developments, roundtables with resident leaders in every community board and door-to-door outreach must be included in NYCHA's plan. Additionally, NYCHA must provide communities with a clear understanding of when and how their developments will eventually be rehabilitated.

At numerous briefings, NYCHA has compared the Public Trust to the New York City School Construction Authority (SCA). The SCA is a bureaucratic quagmire that is often ensnared by its own red tape. NYCHA must make clear how the Public Trust will be different and prove to legislators and its residents that the Public Trust will be able to efficiently and transparently handle the financing and rehabilitation of thousands of units.

Residents consistently complain about NYCHA's indifference to their living conditions and its failure to treat tenants with basic respect. It is imperative that the Public Trust directly engage with NYCHA residents instead of simply replicating the same, apathetic behavior in the form of a new entity. The Blueprint must elucidate the processes by which tenants can report needed repairs, a timeline for when those repairs will be completed after a work order is processed and a transparent tracking system so tenants can monitor and document NYCHA's response. For the Public Trust to earn the confidence of the community and elected officials, the City must reform the way tenants make and track repairs to ensure much-needed work is being addressed.

Other solutions mentioned in the plan, such as the sale of NYCHA's air rights, also warrants careful consideration. For some years, I have asked NYCHA for information about the total air rights within my Manhattan Assembly district; I have yet to receive an adequate response. Every community board and elected official who represents a NYCHA development must be provided with a list of available air rights at the NYCHA developments in their districts. The Trust should make available in a publicly searchable database information about every air rights transaction, including how many air rights have been sold, the total income generated from those sales, the entities that bought NYCHA's air rights and where those air rights were ultimately used. Additionally, it is imperative that if NYCHA sell its air rights, they must go to responsible developers who are committed to building and preserving true affordable and supportive housing for vulnerable New Yorkers.

With that being said, selling a finite resource, such as air rights or underutilized land, makes little economic sense in the long run, and ultimately fails in creating a long-term plan for New York State's public housing.

The future of New York's public housing stock hangs in the balance, and the situation demands an urgent and holistic solution. The debate around how best to ensure NYCHA's future and that of its 400,000+ residents must include and be led by NYCHA residents to ensure their ideas are respected and acted upon. While there are many pieces of the public housing puzzle that are not within NYCHA's control, community engagement is not one of them. NYCHA has the power to improve and expand its current field work to include more town halls, development-specific meetings and presentations on its proposed plans.

My constituents and all NYCHA residents deserve to live in housing that isn't crumbling before their very eyes. Action must be taken at all levels of government to ensure that New Yorkers are not faced with the same terrifying experience that my constituent had to endure. Through funding and common-sense strategies, we must do everything possible to preserve the future of public housing for generations of New Yorkers to come.

Thank you.