

TESTIMONY

BY

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BEFORE

**THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING, COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT, AND INSURANCE**

OF THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Good Afternoon Chairman Cleaver and members of the Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance. I am Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson, and I am grateful for the invitation to testify before all of you today, on such an important topic – improving fire safety in federally assisted housing – and for choosing to host this hearing in our borough and our beloved Bronx Community College campus.

As many of you know, on January 9, 2022, The Bronx experienced one of the most horrific fires in our history. We were shaken by a five-alarm fire that took place at Twin Parks North West, claiming the lives of 17 of our neighbors, including eight children. My office, City agencies, community organizations and other local elected officials, quickly sprang into action to provide immediate relief and help find displaced residents temporary aid and accommodations. Our borough, the entire city and parts of the nation came together in response to this devastating event, and thanks to the overwhelming support of our communities, we were able to distribute aid in the form of food, clothing, bedding, and other essential items for the families. I am especially thankful for our first-responders, the FDNY, NYPD, OEM, and the American Red Cross – who acted decisively and heroically to save as many lives as possible.

This tragedy only heightened the many inequities our residents have historically faced living in federally assisted housing and what we've known to be true all along. There is a lack of attention and accountability in addressing long standing violations and a lack of prioritization in investing and conducting necessary repairs to ensure hospitable, safe and adequate housing for our residents. This fire, as well as many others citywide, could have been prevented had these issues been addressed accordingly. The Twin Parks fire was determined to have been caused by a space heater due to insufficient heating in the building, a common complaint that constantly goes unaddressed.

Additionally, the situation at Twin Parks was made much worse due to malfunctioning or broken self-closing doors. Every death at Twin Parks was caused by smoke inhalation; the fire itself was contained to the apartment it started in and the adjacent hallway. However, because the apartment door did not close behind the evacuating family, this enabled the smoke to rapidly spread throughout the building.

In addition to Twin Parks, dozens of other families have been displaced in fires across the borough so far this year. The causes and effects of these fires have been diverse, but they all show that fire safety is an important priority for The Bronx. There is much that Congress can do both to

prevent future tragedies like this and to improve the situations for the people who have already been affected.

Congress should move forward on two of the bills that are before the Subcommittee today. The first of these bills is H.R. 6528, the “Housing Temperature Safety Act of 2022.” This bill would require the owner of a federally assisted rental dwelling unit to install temperature sensors in such units on each level of the unit. Knowing what the temperatures are in a unit is the first step to ensuring that the heat levels are appropriate for the people who live there. For the City to take action against landlords who are keeping their tenants in the cold, grounding the complaints with a record of temperature history reported to HUD can help provide a basis for remediation and penalties.

The second bill is H.R. 6529, the “Twin Parks North West Fire Safety Act of 2022,” which would require owners of federally assisted rental dwelling units to install self-closing doors in such units. This would apply to both apartment doors, as well as the doors to stairwells. Though this is already the law in New York City, adding a federal mandate will strengthen the enforcement of these policies, particularly when it comes to public housing and section 8 housing. Alongside Bronx Councilman Oswald Feliz, I have proposed two pieces of legislation in the New York City Council that would also increase compliance with the requirement for self-closing doors. Together, we should be able to ensure that every apartment door in the city closes when necessary.

Additionally, Congress should pass the Committees’ consideration to repackage the Build Back Better Act with housing provisions of additional funding for HUD, for repairs, preservation and an increase in the number of vouchers as well as the funding that President Biden requested in his FY` 2023 budget. Keeping residents of public housing in safe, clean, and affordable homes has been a longstanding priority for our City, and this funding will help achieve that goal. Furthermore, the funding in the Build Back Better Act to fund better technology and oversight in making our country’s aging housing safer is also critical. This includes funds to clear the backlog in HUD inspections. Our residents in federally funded housing deserve no less than full support.

The road to recovery and relocation for our impacted residents has been long and burdensome. The challenges of dealing with an extremely low inventory of affordable housing, coupled with limited federal vouchers, has extended the timeline of relocation to permanent housing - creating and inducing additional layers of trauma , job loss and fear of homelessness. Our current system has failed many of our families, who are displaced due to no fault of their own,

but in our collective efforts we have seen how government can work expeditiously, and how we can learn from this experience to affect change that will save lives in years to come.

I want to thank this committee for its work on fire prevention and for tackling this issue as a priority. I especially want to commend The Bronx's very own Congressman Ritchie Torres, who has taken the lead in crafting a federal legislative response to this year's fires. All levels of government can and must work together to fulfill our obligation to our constituents to prevent future fires. Thank you.