

**A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH:
IMPROVING FIRE SAFETY IN
FEDERALLY ASSISTED HOUSING**

FIELD HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING,
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
AND INSURANCE
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH: IMPROVING FIRE SAFETY IN FEDERALLY ASSISTED HOUSING

Wednesday, April 20, 2022

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING,
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
AND INSURANCE,
COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES,
Washington, DC

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 12:01 p.m., at the Hall of Fame Playhouse, Roscoe Brown Student Center, Bronx Community College, 2155 University Avenue, Bronx, New York, and via WebEx, Hon. Emanuel Cleaver [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Cleaver, Green, Torres, and Dean.

Also present: Representatives Espaillat and Evans.

Chairman CLEAVER. The Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development, and Insurance will now come to order.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess of the subcommittee at any time. Also, without objection, Members of the House who are not on the subcommittee are authorized to participate in today's hearing.

Today's hearing is entitled, "A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing."

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

I would like to welcome our first panel of witnesses, but I think maybe we will go back and do the opening statements because I want to make sure Mr. Torres speaks on these issues.

On January 9th, a fire broke out at the Twin Parks North West apartment building, taking the lives of 17 Bronx, New York, residents in what was New York's deadliest fire in 3 decades. The fire was reported to have been caused by a space heater in a third-floor unit, used to stay warm on what was a cold winter morning. As the inferno spread throughout the unit into other parts of the building, survivors reported a thick, chalky smoke that blocked some residents from escaping and incapacitated others as they attempted to flee. Subsequent investigations singled out malfunctioning self-closing doors as a key reason that smoke from the flames quickly engulfed much of the 19-story tower.

The deaths of all victims, including children as young as 2-years-old, was later attributed to smoke inhalation. The incident at Twin

Parks North West was tragic. The incident was also preventable. And I want to be clear: What happened at Twin Parks North West was unacceptable to this committee.

I spent 7 years living in public housing with my mother, father, and 3 sisters, so I understand the whole issue surrounding public housing because I know about it experientially. And I know that there are always going to be struggles. Growing up and living in public housing was a source of pride for my family. If you were lucky enough to live in public housing, you actually had an advantage. It is painful for me to know that today, there are families like mine who wait years and years for Federal assistance, only to live in a unit where they must resort to space heaters to keep their children warm at night, and families living in buildings where property owners have been negligent in their responsibility to provide a safe and healthy environment for their residents. This is not true of all federally assisted housing, or even most, but it is far too common.

Federal, State, and local governments have a responsibility to conduct inspections to enforce the law and, where necessary, to hold owners accountable for the safety of their residents. The tragedy at Twin Parks North West was an unacceptable failure of this system, and it underscores the urgent need to improve oversight of fire safety in federally assisted housing.

The tragedy at Twin Parks North West also underscores the effect our country's affordable housing crisis is having on American families, and the need for additional investment. This committee, under the leadership of Chairwoman Maxine Waters, has worked diligently to advocate for Federal investments in decent, safe, and sanitary housing for American families. We have held hearings. We have drafted and advanced bold legislation responsive to the needs of tenants. And we have now come to New York City at the request of Congressman Torres to highlight the critical need for this committee's legislation to advance in Washington. Importantly, the legislation, still called Build Back Better, and passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in November 2021, includes this committee's provision to provide \$150 billion to expand access to affordable, accessible housing, including \$65 billion to repair and modernize public housing, \$1.6 billion to revitalize distressed multifamily properties, and \$5 billion to address health and safety hazards in low-income housing.

As members of this committee know, the investments put forward by this committee are a matter of life and death for American families across the nation. And as many of you watching today know, the incident at Twin Parks North West was not an isolated incident. I would like to thank you all for being here today, and I look forward to your testimony on what we need to do now.

I now recognize my colleague, the gentleman from New York, Congressman Torres, for 5 minutes.

Mr. TORRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am enormously grateful to you and to Chairwoman Waters for your commitment to affordable housing, not only here in the Bronx, but across the country.

It has been 25 years since the United States Congress has held a hearing in the Bronx, and it is the first time we have done so

on the subject of housing. It is long overdue. The Bronx is Ground Zero for the housing crisis in America, a crisis of both housing quality and housing affordability. The tragedy of Twin Parks North West reminds us that the need for safe, decent, affordable housing is not an abstraction. It is a matter of life and death.

It is not an abstraction to the father who lost every member of his immediate family, nor is it an abstraction to the mother who lost her toddler, nor is it an abstraction for the children who have lost their parents. A lack of access to safe, decent, affordable housing can be a death sentence. It can be a firetrap imposed by a Federal Government whose housing disinvestment is so cruel and callous that it puts poor people of color at grave risk of losing everything—their lives, their loved ones, and their homes—from a catastrophic fire.

Twin Parks North West has held up a mirror to who we are as a society and the grave harm that we have done to the lowest-income people in our country. Twin Parks North West was a tragedy, but it was no accident. It is no accident that New York City's 4 deadliest fires in the past 3 decades have all been here in the Bronx, from Happy Land, to Woodycrest, to Prospect Avenue, to Twin Parks North West.

Most of the people who died in these fires were immigrants, immigrants from Central America and immigrants from Africa, immigrants who came here in search of the American Dream, only to have their lives ravaged by a nightmare, a nightmare made in America and made by decades of deliberate disinvestment in communities like the South Bronx.

Enough is enough. We cannot wait passively for the next tragedy to happen. We must make the housing investments necessary for keeping our people safe in the very place where they deserve to be most safe, which is in their homes.

I yield back.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much.

I would like to now welcome the first panel of witnesses.

First, we have someone who has been very helpful to our committee over the years, Mr. Adolfo Carrion, who is the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

Second, we have Ms. Sandra Clayton, who is a former resident of Twin Parks North West.

Third, we have Ms. Laura Kavanagh, who is the Commissioner of the New York City Fire Department.

Fourth, we have Ms. RuthAnne Visnauskas, who is the Commissioner and CEO of New York State Homes and Community Renewal.

And fifth, we have Ms. Vanessa Gibson, who is the Bronx Borough President.

Thank you all for being here.

Ms. Clayton, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF SANDRA CLAYTON, FORMER RESIDENT OF
TWIN PARKS NORTH WEST**

Ms. CLAYTON. Chairman Cleaver, Ranking Member Hill, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about my experiences at the Twin Parks North West apartment building.

On January 9th, a fire in my building took the lives of 17 residents. The fire started when a portable heater fell on a mattress and ignited, and it spread because the doors were propped open. But tenants had been living in dangerous conditions for years, and the property owners swept it under the rug. Their neglect led to this fire.

I was a tenant in the building for 26 years. Over that time, I saw my building deteriorate. For years, the heat wasn't working properly. I kept four space heaters in my apartment to stay warm. Everyone I know had space heaters. I used to put plastic covers over the A/C vents to prevent the cold air from coming through. Before this tragic event, my building was not perfect, but some issues should have been addressed, like proper working heat.

Before the fire, the front doors of the building were not operating properly, and the building's alarm system was malfunctioning and it would go off at night. When the fire alarm went off in January, I assumed it was nothing, because I was so used to the alarm going off. The only reason why I knew there was an issue and was able to get out safely is because my neighbor yelled down the hallway, "Fire, fire." If not for my neighbor, who knows what would have happened.

After the fire, the Red Cross, BronxWorks, and other organizations were very generous. They gave me furniture, bedsheets, and pots and pans. I am so grateful.

My whole life changed after the fire. I have been receiving counseling services, and I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I watched people who were being resuscitated and were not responding. My ex-girlfriend had tubes down her throat for weeks. I am getting physical therapy now because I hurt my leg. I am thankful that I made it out alive, but I am sad for those who didn't.

During the fire, I lost my dog. I was trying to save myself, my ex-girlfriend, and my dog, but I couldn't. I am so hurt inside, even if I walk around with a smile on.

I am at a new apartment now. I feel safer now. My apartment has a sprinkler system, and I control my own heat and air conditioning. The laundry is on the same floor. The cameras are working.

But I am worried. I sleep with my doors unlocked. I put my clothes for the next day by my bed, just in case I need to run out of the apartment if there is another fire. I am hoping that I will get over this with time, but I am constantly worried.

I had to return to the building a few weeks ago, and my whole body reacted. I remembered how the smoke was coming through the walls, so thick and fast. I will always remember that smell. They are trying to cover up the smell, but I will never forget it.

There were many other health and safety issues at my apartment building that were never fully addressed. There was feces,

urine, and garbage sometimes in the stairwells and hallways. There were rodents in some apartments. Even though they brought in an exterminator, it wasn't fixed, so I had to pay for my own exterminator. The security guards didn't keep us safe. There were no cameras in places where it was needed, like in the stairwells. Management thought that just because we are low income, they can treat us poorly. We had become accustomed to living in bad conditions like that.

There has been so much attention to the building after the fire. Everyone says they want to fix things, but they should have been doing this all along.

I want Congress to take action to keep our buildings safe. It should not take a tragedy before people get serious about improving the conditions in these buildings. If this happens to us, it can happen to other people, too. Congress needs to step up.

Even more importantly, we need to be respected because we matter. Our lives matter. My life matters.

I am just one person, but I want to help change things so that other people do not go through this.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Clayton can be found on page 49 of the appendix.]

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you for your testimony. I think your words are powerful, and we aren't just going to listen to them and forget them.

Ms. CLAYTON. Thank you.

Chairman CLEAVER. Mr. Carrion, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF ADOLFO CARRION, COMMISSIONER FOR ENFORCEMENT AND NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES, NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT (HPD)

Mr. CARRION. Thank you, Chairman Cleaver, and good afternoon. Good afternoon, Congressman Torres. Welcome back home. And hello to the other members of the committee who have joined us, some remotely.

I am Adolfo Carrion, Commissioner at the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). The Twin Parks fire was a devastating tragedy, and we are grateful that you are continuing to focus on the important topic of fire safety as we all work to prevent future fires. We thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I want to take a moment to thank the City's heroic firefighters, EMS workers, and first responders, who sprang into action within minutes of the fire, saving many lives. But we continue to mourn the 17 New Yorkers, including 8 children, whose lives were lost that day. Our hearts go out to Ms. Clayton, who is with us today, and all of the residents who were affected on that tragic day.

Since then, Mayor Adams and teams from across New York City, including HPD, have been working tirelessly to respond to this tragedy. Our first priority has been to attend to the immediate needs of these families, in partnership with the building owners,

the American Red Cross, the New York State Division of Homes and Community Renewal, and our fellow City agencies.

Before turning to HPD's role in code enforcement, and the topic of fire safety, I want to stress the critical role that Federal resources play in all of these efforts. We are very appreciative of the millions of dollars in housing assistance allocated to New York City from the Federal Government. However, additional Federal resources and tools are needed to combat a housing crisis that forces far too many New Yorkers to pay too much of their income towards rent or to live in overcrowded or unsafe conditions. More than ever, the City needs additional funding to protect the quality and longevity of our critical public and affordable housing infrastructure, to provide desperately-needed rental assistance, to bolster local housing code enforcement, and to assist small landlords in properly maintaining their properties to ensure the health and safety of tenants.

We were encouraged that significant housing investments were included in the Build Back Better Act passed by the House, and President Biden's Fiscal Year 2023 budget request to Congress that includes increasing the affordable housing supply.

HPD takes our role in ensuring the safety of New York City renters extremely seriously. HPD inspectors perform over half-a-million inspections annually, either proactively or in response to 311 complaints. Because we have so many important responsibilities, we recognize the need to be surgical in our approach to enforcement, beyond the response to complaints.

In addition, HPD inspectors proactively look for and issue violations for multiple health and safety issues regardless of whether HPD has received tenant complaints. These issues include lead, mold, carbon monoxide detectors, mice and roaches, double cylinder locks, self-closing doors, smoke detectors, and illegal gates. As part of its outreach strategy, HPD continues to educate tenants and owners about health and safety requirements during our general communications through updates to our ABC's of Housing Information Guide, which is also available in more than 10 languages and on our webpage on fire safety.

Given the tragic event at Twin Parks, we know that more can and must be done to protect our fellow New Yorkers. In response to Mayor Adams' Executive Order Number 12, we are proud to strengthen our partnership with the the Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY) around outreach and education, data collection and sharing, and strategies for enhanced enforcement of the fire code. Partnerships with the FDNY and other agencies have intensified our enforcement and education initiatives, and the City is fully committed to protecting the health and safety of all New Yorkers. We appreciate your support and attention at this moment of need for so many Bronx and New York families, and we look forward to working with you on this and so many other critical housing needs.

Thank you for your time, and we look forward to your questions. [The prepared statement of Mr. Carrion can be found on page 46 of the appendix.]

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you, Mr. Carrion.

Ms. Gibson, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF VANESSA L. GIBSON, BRONX BOROUGH
PRESIDENT**

Ms. GIBSON. Thank you so much. Good afternoon, Chairman Cleaver, Congressman Torres, and members of the Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development, and Insurance. I am Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson, and I am grateful for this 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, on our beloved Bronx Community College campus.

As many of you know, on January 9th, the Bronx experienced one of the most horrific fires in our history. We were shaken by this five-alarm fire that took place at Twin Parks North West, claiming the lives of 17 of our neighbors, including 8 children. My office, alongside City and State agencies, community organizations, and all of our elected officials, quickly sprang into action to provide immediate relief and to help find displaced residents temporary aid and accommodations. We witnessed how our Borough, the City, and parts of the nation came together in response to this tragedy. And thanks to the overwhelming support of our communities, we were able to distribute aid in the form of food, clothing, bedding, and so many other essential items for our families. I am especially grateful for our first responders, the FDNY, the Office of Emergency Management, the NYPD, 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 have known to be true all along: There is a lack of attention and accountability in addressing longstanding violations and a lack of priority and investment for necessary repairs to ensure safe, quality, 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 faulty space heater, a system commonly used by many families due to insufficient heating in their building, which records show was a constant complaint that went unaddressed here at Twin Parks.

This unfortunate tragedy also escalated due to the malfunctioning and faulty self-closing door. Every death at Twin Parks was caused by smoke inhalation. The fire itself was contained to the apartment that it started in and the adjacent hallway. However, the apartment door did not close behind the evacuating family, unfortunately, and the fire was able to spread quickly throughout this building.

In addition to Twin Parks, dozens of other families have been displaced in fires here in the Bronx and the in City of New York just this year. The causes and effects of these fires have truly been diverse, but they all show that fire safety must be a priority. There is much work that Congress can do both to prevent future tragedies like this and to improve the housing conditions for the people who have already been affected.

We need stronger laws that hold landlords and property owners accountable, and more funding to help revitalize and preserve our current inventory of affordable housing. Congress should move forward on two of the bills before the subcommittee today, introduced by Congressman Torres.

The first is H.R. 6528, the Housing Temperature Safety Act of 2022. This bill would require the owner of federally assisted rental dwelling units to install temperature sensors in such units on each level of the unit.

The second bill is H.R. 6529, known as 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. Although this is already the law here 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.

Along with local Councilman Oswald Feliz, I have helped to introduce two pieces of legislation here in the New York City Council that would increase compliance with the requirement for self-closing doors. Together, we should be able to ensure that every apartment door in New York City closes when necessary.

I want to commend the House for the passage of the Build Back Better Act that is inclusive of housing provisions for additional funding for HUD, aimed at expanding access to affordable housing, tackling the severe backlog of repairs, and addressing health and safety standards in all federally funded housing. It has been made clear from the discoveries of all of these tragedies that funding is desperately needed, and this is truly a matter of life and death.

I also want to urge Congress to support our President's Fiscal Year 2023 budget request, which includes more funding for HUD to address housing deficiencies.

As you have heard from so many residents and witnesses, the road to recovery for Twin Parks has been long and burdensome. The timeline we envision for relocation has only been extended because of current housing crises, coupled with limited Federal vouchers. We truly can turn our pain into purpose, and I want to thank this committee for your work on tackling fire prevention and housing safety as a priority. I also want to thank Congressman Ritchie Torres, who has taken the lead in crafting Federal legislative action to address the fires that we have had this year.

All levels of government, Mr. Chairman, can truly work together—Federal, State, and local government—working with all of our stakeholders, to prevent future fires across the country.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning, and I look forward to your questions, and thank you so much for your leadership and your commitment to all Americans. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Gibson can be found on page 51 of the appendix.]

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much, Ms. Gibson, for your testimony.

Ms. Kavanagh, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF LAURA KAVANAGH, COMMISSIONER, NEW
YORK CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT**

Ms. KAVANAGH. Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairman Cleaver, Congressman Torres, and members of the Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development, and Insurance. My name is Laura Kavanaugh, and I am the Acting Commissioner of the New York City Fire Department. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the fire at the Twin Parks housing development and how we can ensure that the Fire Department and our partners and government are doing everything we can to keep New Yorkers and all Americans safe.

On Sunday, January 9th, just before 11 a.m., the Fire Department received a call about a fire in a duplex apartment in the Twin Parks North West building in the Bronx. Approximately 3 minutes later, the first FDNY units arrived. The fire ultimately resulted in the death of 17 residents, and 46 others were hospitalized. The scale of the tragedy was staggering even for the veteran firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics who respond to life and death incidents every day.

The deaths and injuries that occurred at Twin Parks were the result of heavy smoke that moved rapidly throughout the building, reaching stairwells and hallways. In total, the Fire Department dispatched 200 firefighters and 57 ambulances to the scene. Every available paramedic in the City was sent to help. Fifteen residents who were discovered in cardiac arrest were rescued and successfully transported to local hospitals. Dozens of others received assistance from firefighters and immediate medical care from EMTs and paramedics. But for the efforts of those first responders, the number of lives lost would have been even greater.

In the aftermath of the Twin Parks fire, Mayor Adams issued Executive Order 12, which requires greater information sharing between the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the Fire Department. This strengthened coordination will improve the way that the Fire Department conducts inspections.

Executive Order 12 also directs the Fire Department and other City agencies to increase public awareness regarding fire safety practices. A key lesson learned from the Twin Parks fire is the importance of educating New Yorkers about closing the door when fleeing a fire. In this incident, the fire itself was contained rather quickly, but the door to the apartment that was on fire and some doors in the hallways and stairwells throughout the building remained open, allowing toxic smoke to spread quickly to every floor. Closing the door in the room where a fire is located isolates the fire and prevents smoke, heat, and flames from spreading to hallways and stairs. The Fire Department has devoted a great deal of attention over the last several years to making sure that New Yorkers understand the importance of closing their doors when escaping a fire. We have worked to educate the public via social media messages, public service announcements, and community outreach. Our message is consistent: Closing the door saves lives.

Outreach and education are critical to maintaining public safety. FDNY's Fire Safety Education unit has a robust program that reaches all areas of the City, focusing on messaging about closing the door and a variety of other topics. Active and retired fire-

fighters host events with targeted fire safety content and materials to increase awareness of fire and life safety tips, as well as disaster preparedness. This includes but is not limited to fire safety presentations, smoke alarm installation campaigns, and mobile CPR trainings. The Fire Safety Education unit also responds to all major fires, sending teams into the surrounding neighborhood within 24 hours to connect with the community, distribute fire safety information, and sign people up for smoke alarm installations. From 2015 through 2021, the Fire Department distributed or installed 200,000 free smoke alarms.

In 2021, even with in-person presentations severely limited, the Fire Department conducted 2,100 fire safety presentations, reaching an audience of more than 150,000 New Yorkers, and 601 of those presentations were here in the Bronx, which amounted to 28 percent of all presentations citywide. The rate of those events has increased dramatically this year. In the first quarter of 2022, FDNY has performed nearly 1,100 presentations, including reaching audiences of 22,000 school children. And 900 presentations have been scheduled since the Twin Parks fire. We also post fire safety education materials online. Last year, those pages received more than 26 million hits.

Looking specifically at the Bronx, FDNY ramped up our outreach in this Borough in the immediate aftermath of the Twin Parks fire, and we have not slowed down. In the weeks following the fire, we engaged with partners at the Department of Education, the New York City Police Department, the American Red Cross, and a wide range of community boards, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations. We are coordinating with the Department of Education to distribute messaging to educators and to share opportunities to schedule presentations in their own classrooms. We are working with several individual building managers in the Bronx to set up virtual fire safety presentations for tenants.

January 9th was the kind of day that stays with first responders for the rest of their careers. Nobody who was involved that day will ever forget the devastation and the loss. Our obligation to those we have lost is to learn from what we have experienced and to recommit ourselves to finding ways to better protect the people of New York City. I thank the subcommittee and the House of Representatives for your partnership and attention to fire safety issues and for the opportunity to speak with you today. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Kavanagh can be found on page 55 of the appendix.]

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you, Ms. Kavanagh, for your testimony.

Commissioner Visnaukas, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to make an oral presentation of your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF RUTHANNE VISNAUSKAS, COMMISSIONER
AND CEO, NEW YORK STATE HOMES AND COMMUNITY RE-
NEWAL**

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. Thank you, Chairman Cleaver, Congressman Torres, and other Members for holding today's hearing on the need for new legislation to better ensure the safety of public and affordable housing in America. I would like to thank my counterparts at

HPD for being great partners in this process. And we would like to thank the FDNY for their bravery on that January 9th day. We thank the borough president for really being a tireless advocate for the residents in this community. And we thank Ms. Clayton. We really value your voice in this conversation and we are happy to be alongside you today.

I am RuthAnne Visnauskas, Commissioner of New York State Homes and Community Renewal (HCR), where our mission is to build, protect, and preserve affordable housing throughout New York State. As part of that work, HCR supports local governments and municipalities in administering Section 8 vouchers, rent stabilization and rent control, and State home ownership assistance programs, and we are charged with implementing Governor Hochul's ambitious 5-year, \$25 billion housing plan to create and preserve affordable housing.

Today, I am here to talk about the tragic Twin Parks fire that took the lives of 17 people and upended the lives of all of the residents in the building, as well as their extended families and the larger community. I am also here today to share both the State's response to the fire and to discuss what more Congress and State and local governments can do to protect residents living in affordable housing, including those in lower-income, working-class, and immigrant families.

Following the fire, the primary focus of HDR and my State colleagues has been to support the residents in securing safe new housing in a community of their choice. Together with the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the State Office of Temporary Disability Assistance, the Borough President's Office, and many of your offices, as well as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, we have actively engaged with the tenants, the property owner, and the affordable housing community to ensure that the building's residents received both immediate emergency assistance, as well as options for long-term relocation.

Additionally, HDR engaged CVR Associates, which administers Project-based Section 8 vouchers on behalf of the agency in the Bronx, to work with all of the residents of Twin Parks who wish to relocate. Current voucher holders can take their vouchers with them if they move, and HDR has worked closely with HUD to provide new access to Section 8 vouchers for eligible individuals who were living in the building without a subsidy.

Additionally, Governor Hochul made \$2 million available to victims for housing relocation services, case management, moving expenses, security deposits for new apartments, and reimbursement for families in need of new furniture and other necessities. We are thankful that the City of New York quickly made available a newly constructed affordable property in the Bronx called La Central. To date, more than 95 families have applied to the new building, 66 families have signed leases, and 58 have already moved in.

CVR is continuing to work with each family to identify housing that meets their needs in the neighborhood or community of their choice and on a timeline that works for them.

Looking forward, we must work together at all levels of government to strengthen public and affordable housing protections before

another tragedy can strike. The construction and maintenance of subsidized housing in this country is a multilayered collaboration between Federal, State, and local agencies that crosses urban and rural areas. Within this ecosystem, one of HDR's primary roles is to ensure that building owners comply with Federal guidelines and requirements. As the affordable housing agency for the State, we administer several programs, including HOME, CDBG, Section 8, as well as 4 percent and 9 percent low-income housing tax credit programs. We provide fiscal, regulatory, and physical oversight of these buildings. We are required to conduct ongoing compliance visits in accordance with the Federal rules by inspecting units in federally subsidized properties to confirm that owners are meeting those Federal standards.

We take our responsibility of making sure that building owners comply with these requirements very seriously. The tragic fire is a clear signal that we must do more. Our constituencies are depending on us all, Federal agencies, State agencies, and local agencies, to identify and implement new ways to mitigate safety risks and to enhance health and safety requirements for public and affordable housing. As part of this, New York State urges Congress to advance some key measures.

One, increase Federal funding specifically for safety inspections, as well as funding to support new technology-based infrastructure between local, State, and Federal partners to better ensure compliance monitoring.

Two, improve subsidized and affordable housing through the \$150 billion proposed Federal investment from Build Back Better to address the massive backlog of public housing capital needs and improve conditions for tenants in all affordable housing.

Three, require that space heaters be produced and sold with automatic shut-off switches.

Four, work with industry experts to determine the efficacy and affordability of heat sensors in subsidized multifamily buildings to increase building safety.

And lastly, create a commission with owners, tenants, State agencies, and local code enforcement entities to examine, change, or update the HUD inspection protocols.

Local perspectives are critical, as it is the local entities and tenants who are most aware of the unique features and the challenges of the housing stock in their own communities. We must work together to keep our low-income households, our seniors, our veterans, and our vulnerable populations free from the risk of tragedy in their homes. While we have been doing this for decades, there is still much more to be done. HDR stands ready to work with our partners towards systemic as well as practical measures at both the Federal and the local level that will increase the safety of buildings and better protect the individuals and families who reside in affordable housing across this State.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Visnauskas can be found on page 57 of the appendix.]

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much, Ms. Visnauskas.

I will now recognize myself for 5 minutes for questions.

Ms. Kavanagh, when I grew up in public housing back in the Cro-Magnon era, the issue of self-closing doors was nothing. Nobody said anything about doors self-closing, you know? We just made ourselves vulnerable based on what we know today. And following the 2017 fire that claimed the lives of 13 people in a Bronx high rise, the City Council passed a law requiring self-closing doors in all buildings with three or more apartments.

Can you explain the function of self-closing doors as it relates to reducing fatalities and property damage during a fire emergency?

Ms. KAVANAGH. Sure. I would say that I would also recognize that is not something I knew growing up either, and that is why public education is very important to us and to me personally. I don't think it is a given. We would like it to be. We would like it to be like stop, drop and roll is, something we all learned so often as kids we don't even know where we learned it but it is just there. That is what we want, "close the door," to be common, so that is what we are working towards.

But the reason is actually quite simple. It contains the fire to either the apartment or even the room within the apartment. And I think that is why this is important to emphasize even as we increase enforcement for self-closing doors, because in some cases we may be talking about an interior door to the bathroom or a bedroom that you could close and it would contain the fire to that room, and thus contain the smoke to that room. And as you have heard, in this fire, smoke was the cause of the deaths, not fire. And so, it is as simple as containing the fire to as small an area as possible.

Chairman CLEAVER. But the malfunctioning doors did contribute?

Ms. KAVANAGH. Correct. In this case, the doors did not close in a number of areas, not only in the apartment but in some of the hallways as well.

Chairman CLEAVER. Do they require some constant maintenance? Is there a process by which the Fire Department or some City Government agency checks the buildings to see if there is, in fact, compliance?

Ms. KAVANAGH. Yes. The Fire Department checks common areas, and this is one of the things we check, self-closing doors. HPD, our partner agency, is the one who inspects interior doors in apartments, so that is not something that we check. But both agencies have that in their inspection protocol. I am not sure about the maintenance. I am not an expert in self-closing doors. But what I would say is there can be a few causes. It is not always that the same part of the door might malfunction. Things like putting down a new layer of flooring could cause a door to get stuck open, which isn't about the hinge malfunctioning. That is why it is very important to check frequently.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much.

Mr. Carrion, in 2016, the Housing Opportunity Through Modernization Act (HOTMA) was signed into law. HOTMA made a number of changes to statutes that govern HUD programs, including the establishment of minimum heating standards for HUD-assisted dwelling units. Residents in public housing have continued to raise concerns about the temperature of units and at times re-

ported using equipment such as portable space heaters or leaving ovens open to stay warm.

How does New York City ensure that housing units meet these temperature requirements to comply with both Federal and local laws?

Mr. CARRION. Mr. Chairman, the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development is responsible for inspecting all of the multifamily, privately-owned residential buildings in New York City. There are approximately 825,000 residential buildings in New York City, and approximately 212,000 of those are multifamily, privately-owned buildings, which is an incredible amount of real estate and an incredible amount of housing units.

We have a proactive and a reactive system. On the reactive side, it is what every smart municipality does, which is you create a system where people are able to file complaints and then you respond to those complaints. We have a corps of inspectors. We are budgeted for 429 inspectors in our agency. We currently have 287, so we are short about 142 inspectors. But we are responsible for going out there and responding to, in the case of Fiscal Year 2021, in excess of 500,000 complaints that came in, and we did 630,000 inspections in just one fiscal year and issued 620,000 violations, many of them heat-related.

But we have a nine-point system, and I want to put it into context, because every time we go out, we check for health and we check for fire. We check for lead, mold, carbon dioxide detectors, mice and roaches, double cylinder locks, smoke detectors, illegal gates, and self-closing doors. We also answer heat and hot water complaints.

So, there is a constant drumbeat of inspecting properties, residential properties throughout New York City, to ensure that folks have heat, and there is a system of violations where those violations need to be corrected almost immediately. There is a clock on those. We are constantly chasing this challenge.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much for your response.

The gentleman from New York, Mr. Torres, is now recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. TORRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We know that if the self-closing door had been properly functioning at Twin Parks North West, the smoke would have been contained and countless lives would have been saved.

Local law requires landlords to install and maintain self-closing doors. In addition to HPD, the housing department, both the buildings department and the Fire Department, have the authority to issue violations relating to self-closing doors; is that correct? And these violations are adjudicated by the Environmental Control Board, which as of 2020 had \$1.5 billion in uncollected fines. The inability to collect fines raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the City's mechanism for enforcing the self-closing door mandate, hence the need for Federal intervention.

My question to the HPD Commissioner is, if there were a Federal mandate for self-closing doors, and if you had the authority to suspend a Section 8 payment to a landlord based on a violation of that mandate, would that provide the City of New York with a powerful enforcement tool?

Mr. CARRION. Thank you, Representative Torres. We passed, and you were in the City Council when it happened, a local law making the self-closing door a life and safety emergency repair required condition that needed to be corrected within this 21-day period that is in the local law. That is a very important step toward addressing this problem. The housing quality standard at the Federal level still does not have the self-closing door as a requirement, and other agencies can speak to this. We are encouraged by the fact that in our conversations with HUD, they are moving in that direction, with an expected date of requiring self-closing doors of September 2023. We are encouraging that that happens sooner rather than later.

Mr. TORRES. And that would enhance your ability to enforce—

Mr. CARRION. That would create a Federal backstop. It would show the Federal commitment to this important issue.

Mr. TORRES. You spoke about intensified enforcement. Do you have data on the number of—since the fire in Twin Parks North West, how many inspections has the City conducted? How many violations has the City issued in relation to self-closing doors?

Mr. CARRION. It is an interesting phenomenon. I think it points to the need for us to educate the public because of that huge number of violations that we issued, 620,000. Less than about three-tenths of 1 percent, or 99.7 percent of the violations issued were not for self-closing doors. We issued 22,000 violations in one fiscal year. Eighty percent of them were cured, but the violations and the complaints don't quite match up.

Mr. TORRES. What about since the fire? How many inspections? If you don't have the data, can you get the committee that information?

Mr. CARRION. I'm sorry. What was the question?

Mr. TORRES. The number of inspections and violations since the fire.

Mr. CARRION. Oh, we can provide that. Certainly, for sure.

Mr. TORRES. As you know, the use of space heaters is often a cry for help, and a cry for heat. And when it comes to heat in the apartment, common sense dictates that the temperature on the inside should depend on the temperature on the outside. If the temperature on the outside is lower than the temperature on the inside, it should be higher to keep tenants warm. And yet, during nighttime, New York City law only requires the indoor temperature to be 62 degrees, regardless of the outdoor temperature. The outdoor temperature could be 50 degrees or 25 degrees, or zero degrees. No matter what the outdoor temperature might be, the required indoor temperature at nighttime remains frozen at 62 degrees.

Does that make sense? Does it make sense to have the same indoor temperature requirement for zero degree weather as you would have for 50 degree weather?

Mr. CARRION. I am not a heat expert.

Mr. TORRES. At the level of common sense.

Mr. CARRION. Right. Common sense tells you that you might want to be a little warmer than 62 degrees. I keep my home a little warmer than that.

We have a heat season that starts in October and runs through the spring. We are coming up on that heat season, and I just want to take this opportunity to tell Congress that with your support, we could increase the corps of inspectors that we have, the army of inspectors that we have, the creation of affordable housing, the quality of that affordable housing, make it modern, smart heating, all the things that our agency is charged with doing, which is creating high-quality housing that is affordable to New Yorkers.

Mr. TORRES. It seems like you acknowledge that even if the landlord is providing the legally required amount of heat, what the law requires might fall short of what tenants would need to remain warm in their apartment. You acknowledge that at some level.

Mr. CARRION. I think just as a human being, yes, not as an official.

Mr. TORRES. I am going to wrap up, but how often do HPD and HCR—both administrators of Section 8, a federally funded, federally regulated program but administered by local authorities—conduct Section 8 inspections of apartments in buildings? And are those inspections proactive or complaint-based?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. I will give you a rest. I will go first for a second.

We go out annually for a project-based voucher. As a tenant base, we are going out upon lease-up. So, we are going out if the apartment turns over annually, and on the project-based we go out and inspect 20 percent of the units every year in those buildings.

Mr. TORRES. Annual inspections? How often? The Section 8 inspections.

Mr. CARRION. Yes. The bonus that the Section 8 voucher holder in New York City gets is that they get a lot more inspections from the City of New York than any other agency.

Mr. TORRES. How often are those inspections?

Mr. CARRION. But the Section 8 inspections, I am thinking they are biennial for the housing quality standard. And if I am wrong, we can correct the record.

Mr. TORRES. Get back to us on this.

Mr. CARRION. Yes.

Mr. TORRES. So, if I am a tenant with an HDR voucher, and I submit a complaint about inadequate heat and hot water, do you just wait a year in order to conduct the inspection, or is there a complaint-based inspection, and how long would it take to send a Section 8 inspector to my apartment?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. If we find a heat issue on the inspection, to the extent it was a health and safety, it would have to be corrected within 24 hours. Otherwise, there's a 30-day for all inspections to be cured if they are not life and safety. But we also respond to tenant complaints proactively. So if a tenant calls us and complains, we would go out. We also would refer tenants to the City's 311, which is really the first line of defense for issues around heat and hot water as they are enforcing the housing maintenance code.

Mr. TORRES. And I am going to wrap it up.

New York State and New York City have a confusing patchwork of inspections. There are inspections conducted under Federal, State, and local law: inspections conducted by HUD at the Federal level; each year at the State level; HPD/FDNY/DOB at the local

level; there are inspections of public housing conducted by HUD; inspections of regulated housing conducted by HCR; inspections of all units conducted by HPD, and inspections of Section 8 units conducted by HCR, HPD, and NYCHA. This raises the question, does the left hand know what the right hand is doing?

Suppose a New York City HPD inspector found a dangerous condition in a Section 8 rent-regulated unit. Would that HPD inspector automatically notify the Section 8 administrator—say, HDR—about the dangerous condition in the Section 8 building? Is there a system of automatic notification among the various inspectors?

Mr. CARRION. The first level of responsibility is to contact the landlord, the tenant, start the clock on any especially emergency condition, and level the penalties immediately if the condition doesn't get corrected. I have been on the job for 8 weeks, so I am not entirely sure what the protocols are between our agencies in terms of sharing that automatically, but I am sure there is—

Mr. TORRES. I suspect there is no system of automatic coordination and notification. Is that correct, Commissioner?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. Correct. I think in general, the first line of defense would go to the City. The City would ensure that violation is corrected. And certainly in the case of an emergency violation, immediately. But they would not necessarily notify us if they—

Mr. TORRES. The City is conducting inspections under the local law, whereas if you are a Section 8 administrator, you are enforcing housing quality standards under Federal law?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. Correct.

Mr. TORRES. There should be a system of automatic coordination and notification among Federal, State, and City inspectors, and I will leave it at that. Thank you.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The gentlewoman from Pennsylvania, Ms. Dean, is now recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Chairman Cleaver, and Congressman Torres, for holding this hearing and for allowing me to participate. I thank all of our witnesses also for testifying today.

First, my deepest condolences to the extraordinary loss that your entire community suffered, and, of course, that we all suffer after such a tragedy. The devastating fire that occurred at Twin Parks North is just unforgivable and preventable. So, I am appreciative of this hearing and the chance to listen and to learn from all of you.

And while we are in the Bronx today, I wanted to shed light on what happened and what we can do differently in the future to avoid another Twin Parks North West.

I wanted to take a moment to focus on a horrific blaze that occurred in our City, Representative Evans' and mine, Philadelphia, just days before your tragic fire. In the early morning hours of January the 5th, a fire broke out in a Philadelphia row house owned by the Philadelphia Housing Authority, killing three sisters and nine of their children. In fact, Mr. Chairman, I have an article from the Philadelphia Enquirer entitled, "Remembering Those Lost in the Fairmount Fire," that I will enter into the record.

Chairman CLEAVER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Ms. DEAN. My heart breaks for these families. They were loving mothers, aspiring students. One of their children was a 2-year-old baby. Even more heartbreaking are some of the facts that have emerged around this fire, not that I am claiming to have expertise as to causes of fires, but it became clear through these tragic deaths in Philadelphia that they could have been prevented with greater safeguards, just like the things we are talking about today.

In that property in Philadelphia, of the seven smoke alarms in the house, all of which were the kind that require a frequent battery replacement, four were in drawers, one was on the floor without batteries, one was on the ceiling without batteries, and a final alarm was working but located in the basement.

I have entered some legislation around smoke detectors in federally assisted housing, and to authorize \$2 million for public awareness campaigns on health and safety.

My first question really is for Ms. Clayton. I am so sorry for the loss and the trauma you have suffered. Can you talk about your experience as a resident in the tower in terms of the property maintenance, in terms of responsiveness to complaints by residents of health and safety problems?

Ms. CLAYTON. Thank you. In response to maintenance, I have put in a number of complaints about the heating. They will come and they will look, because we have baseboard heaters. And they call themselves blowing it out or whatever, because I don't know what they are doing, okay? So it gets warm for maybe a day, and we are right back to my normal, putting on my portable heaters.

Ms. DEAN. And that was a common lot within your properties; is that correct?

Ms. CLAYTON. Yes.

Ms. DEAN. I have dealt with this at the local level here with private housing, not federally assisted housing, but the same kind of thing where the property owner responds, puts a temporary fix, and really never answers the questions around health and safety.

Mr. Carrion and Ms. Visnaukas, what are some of the barriers to ensuring that every affordable housing unit has fully-functioning smoke detectors, for example?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. I would say—thank you for the question—that we are very vigilant in our inspections around smoke detectors, and even in places where they are not always required when we are doing work in buildings, making sure they are being installed in the case of preservation and rehabilitation work. I think in general there is a New York State, and perhaps similar in some parts of Pennsylvania as well—the housing stock is very old and it is very much in need of investment. And I think at the New York State and New York City level, we have made incredible investments in terms of capital into the housing stock, but we need more. And we have been fixed certainly from the perspective of Federal resources, whether it is Section 8 vouchers or low-income housing tax credits, tax-exempt volume cap, these resources are the backbone of the work that we do to invest in the existing housing stock in this State, and we need more of them, and we need more of them by a large stretch, and they have been somewhat stagnant for a decade or more.

So, I think it is incumbent on all of us to keep pressuring and asking for resources like what was proposed in Build Back Better so that we can exponentially increase the amount of investment we are making into the existing housing stock to make sure things like smoke detectors that are in older buildings, where they may not be hardwired or may not be properly functioning, are made safe for all the residents who live there.

Chairman CLEAVER. Congresswoman, we may have another round of questioning.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you. I appreciate those answers, and I yield back.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Evans.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to participate in this critical field hearing. My congressional district encompasses parts of the City of Philadelphia, where in January, as Congresswoman Dean stated, we lost 12 Fairmount residents in a fatal house fire. Eight of those who died were children. Our community remains devastated.

But I also appreciate HUD and the House Financial Services Committee for investigating this particular tragedy, and I thank Congressman Torres for taking the leadership that he is showing, since this is obviously not just a problem in New York, but one that faces our nation.

In the Philadelphia fire, the four smoke detectors were not functioning. The 3 stories and 2 apartments housed 26 people. People do not settle for unsafe housing when they have better choices, but our nation has done little to provide financial stability and housing support for Black and very low-income families. They live in places where they are exposed to serious hazards, and it is important that we address it.

I look forward to working with Mr. Torres on the Financial Services Committee, and with HUD on Federal policies relating to financial strategies, particularly for federally assisted properties.

The site of the fatal Philadelphia fire was old. But, Ms. Kavanagh, does much of our nation's pre-1992 public housing stock meet the standards under the Fire Administration Authorization Act?

Ms. KAVANAGH. I can't speak to that Act specifically, but I can say that the newest constructed housing is the safest. It is built under the newest codes and has the most safety protections.

Mr. EVANS. What would you suggest in terms of policies around smoke detectors, involving safety conditions in federally assisted housing, to prevent similar tragedies from occurring?

Ms. KAVANAGH. I think when it comes to smoke detectors, as my colleagues have referenced, things like hardwired detectors are the safest. It means they are less likely to fail, run out of battery, or even be able to be disabled for a number of reasons. But in the absence of hardwired detectors, we strongly encourage and run many of our own programs and give away, as you heard, thousands of smoke alarms every year to ensure that those residents who need them have them, especially maybe those who can't afford them, or seniors who may not be able to put them up when they fail. So,

we run a whole program around that, about getting detectors into the homes where they are needed.

Mr. EVANS. How could Congress and building owners improve safety measures and reduce fire risk?

Ms. KAVANAGH. I think many of the things that we have discussed here, many of the things that were in the Mayor's Executive Order will help from the top down. But we continue as a department to also work, and certainly the departments in your cities would probably love to do the same or already are doing the same work from the community level as well, to help residents know about their lived experiences in buildings and respond to those specific conditions and get them the materials that they need and the detectors that they need in their homes.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you, Mr. Evans.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from New York, Mr. Espallat.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you, Chairman Cleaver, and I also thank my colleague, Congressman Torres.

Much has been said about the tragic fires in the Bronx. The Bronx seems to be the borough that in the past decades has witnessed and suffered tremendous tragedies with fires. Other neighborhoods in the City also have a similar housing stock and also suffer tragedy in fires.

The Fire Administration Authorization Act of 1992 requires the installation of fire sprinklers in high-rises. Obviously, much of the housing stock has been built before that, and probably a lot of the housing stock is currently not meeting those safety standards established by the Fire Administration Authorization Act.

I believe very strongly that prevention is driven by inspection and education. Commissioner Carrion, how many inspectors does HPD have?

Mr. CARRION. Thank you, Congressman. We are currently budgeted for 429 inspectors, and I think, before you arrived, I mentioned that we have approximately 825,000 residential buildings in New York City, and 212,000 or so multifamily buildings. We currently have 287 inspectors, so we have vacancies. We have had severe attrition, so we are trying to backfill those vacancies. Those are positions that are budgeted, but we need to backfill them.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you.

Commissioner Kavanagh, how many fire inspectors do you have?

Ms. KAVANAGH. We do inspections two ways. We have fire protection inspectors who work out of headquarters and a few of our district offices. There are approximately 300 of those. Much like HPD, we have suffered, especially under COVID, some attrition, unfortunately, the loss of some inspectors, but we are hiring again now. But our field units are fire field units who also inspect buildings in their administrative units. And we have done approximately 40,000 of those in 2021 by field units.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Commissioner Visnauskas, how many inspectors do you have?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. Housing inspections around the State are generally handled by the local housing agency.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. How many do you have for New York City?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. We have about 50 inspectors who do inspections in our asset management portfolio, but we also have a series of administrators who are responsible for our Section 8 buildings, and they have inspectors that they hire. I don't have the full number for—those would really be the inspectors that are covering all the Federal, the Project-based Section 8 federally subsidized portfolio. They are not centralized State staff. They are contractors that we use, so I can get back to you with that number.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. It seems to me that given the conditions of the housing stock in the Bronx and in other neighborhoods of the City of New York, the very dilapidated, unsafe conditions of the housing stock where families live, obviously, that we don't have enough fire inspectors. And again, prevention is driven by inspection and education.

And so, Mr. Chairman, we must see how we can assist local authorities, but also I think that the local authorities have the responsibility, also the budgetary responsibility, to see how much more they put in their budget to hire additional inspectors.

The second issue is education, because there is a direct connection between education and fire safety. I remember speaking to Commissioner Kavanagh about this issue. I know that in this building, in the Twin Parks building, many of the families were immigrants, and this is a City that is very diverse. People come from different countries, they speak different languages, they have different customs.

How diverse, Commissioner Kavanagh, is the fire safety education initiative program within the City? Is it bilingual? Trilingual? Do we connect it to the Russian community in Brighton Beach, the Chinese community in Flushing, the Mexican community in a barrio, to the Dominican community in the Bronx, to the African-American community in Harlem and in the Bronx? How do we address the bilingual and cultural competency needs of fire safety, and do we have a reliable program that will educate tenants to take the measures that they need to take to save their families?

Ms. KAVANAGH. We do have everything you mentioned. We do have bilingual and trilingual fire safety educators. We have also implemented local field units going and doing education themselves, and one reason that is so significant is that the department, as it has diversified, has given first priority to where a firefighter works, to the neighborhood they grew up in. And what that also means is that in neighborhood schools, if you are getting it from your local company, you are far more likely to be getting somebody who grew up in that neighborhood, likely speaks the same language as you, maybe comes from a similar cultural or religious background, and we think that is really important. So, we are doing all of those things. Our website also comes in every language imaginable, so you can download materials in any language you need.

But I would say I think one of the things that has been significant in the wake of this fire, and that the Adams administration has done for us is taking down the silos between agencies and trying to engage the community significantly more. As a community organizer myself, I really believe that education is not just about

handing out literature, and no matter how many languages you have it in, it really is about understanding the local community and engaging it from the ground up, and so you are seeing a lot more of that. The connections with clergy following this fire have been very important, and the connections, I think particularly in the local schools, where many of the children of these immigrants attend and are bringing back information to their parents.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Mr. Chairman, if I may just conclude, this is a huge undertaking. I cannot guarantee that we have the tools in place to prevent this from occurring again. Just the number of properties across the City and the condition that they are in, the dilapidated, abandoned condition that they are in requires a robust effort to inspect and to educate, and I think requires a major investment.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to working with you and Congressman Torres and the committee to see how we can assist the City of New York, and particularly the Bronx, the Borough of the Bronx, in this endeavor.

Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

I am not sure if Mr. Green from Texas is on the platform or not.

Mr. GREEN. Mr. Chairman, can you hear me?

Chairman CLEAVER. Yes, we can, but we cannot see you.

Mr. GREEN. Okay. Well, I am showing on my camera. I am so sorry. I am mobile at this time and I see myself in the camera, and I obviously can hear what is going on at the hearing and see it. But if you can't see me, I will understand and I will simply say that I appreciate you having the hearing and I look forward to doing all that I can to help you with the remedies that are necessary.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Green.

We are going to have another round of questions. We will give each Member 2 additional minutes to ask a question, and then I am going to do something I was told not to do.

But we will now start the second round, and I would open the second round of questioning by asking Ms. Gibson if you can explain to me—and maybe everybody else knows it—how the tenant organizations can help articulate the problems to people in positions of government and how the tenants can become the eyes and ears that take in information and then give it to the proper sources.

Ms. GIBSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the question. For us, the tenant and tenant leaders and organizations on the ground are credible messengers. They have the ability to connect and communicate with many of the residents. Oftentimes, they have a continuity of relationships. And what we have learned in the days of Twin Parks is that there are credible messengers on the ground, organizations like the Gambian Youth Organization (GYO), and the Muslim Community Network. Many of our Muslim leaders and other community leaders of different faiths have really come together and really surrounded these families with love and support. And of course, the first priority was to guarantee that there would be hotel accommodations in the immediate days after January 9th,

and now, weeks later, we are still working to accommodate long-term relocation efforts for the families.

But what we have also learned and what you typically will learn in the event of these types of tragedies is that there are many families in our City and in our State who are doubled and tripled up. You have many families with multiple children, large families who are living in apartments that are not conducive to their household size.

What we have been able to do on the ground with organizations like BronxWorks and CVR is a lot of intensive case management, understanding the household needs, the household size, and the household incomes. There are working-class families in this building where many of the families had working income, and so many of them need to be accommodated as well.

Working with a lot of our tenant organizations like GYO and others, we have been able to understand a lot of the very unique needs of many of these families, immigrant families who come from so many different places, parts of West Africa, the African American and the Latino community. We have been able to really navigate and help understand what they are going through every day.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much.

My 2 minutes are up, but we are going to try to get Mr. Green from Texas on. If you can't see him, I am describing him as a very handsome, youthful man, athletically built.

[laughter]

Mr. Green, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for those very kind words. My mother would love you for that. Thank you.

I do have a question. As you know, the American Rescue Plan provided some \$20 million to fix the Fair Housing Initiative Program, and we have some \$70 million proposed in the Build Back Better Act. My question has to do with safety and how this additional money could be a benefit.

Is there someone who would like to respond to how an additional \$70 million could help us with some of the issues that we are currently confronting? And I do want you to know that these issues touch our hearts, because people are losing their lives, and the title for the hearing is most appropriate. Would someone kindly respond to the question with reference to providing an additional \$70 million to this program?

Chairman CLEAVER. Any of the panelists?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. Is the funding specifically targeted to outreach, or is it another thing?

Mr. GREEN. The funding is from the Fair Housing Initiative Program and is for enforcement with these new funds, to help you with enforcement.

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. I think I could sort of just table set and say I think we all believe on this panel that there is a big opportunity with our Federal counterparts at HUD to be better coordinated on communication. It certainly has been something from the Hochul administration day one, and down towards the Adams administration around better communication and coordination. I think funding with a coordinated strategy in New York City and really state-wide around space heaters, around self-closing doors is really crit-

ical, and we rely on tenants to understand also when something isn't working, that they know whom to call and they know that they can report it. Oftentimes, people are afraid to report things that are wrong in their apartment, so sort of addressing that issue I think as part of an outreach plan would certainly be something that I think all of us at this table would be happy to utilize funding to really make sure people understand what type of enforcement is available and what their rights are.

Chairman CLEAVER. Mr. Carrion?

Mr. CARRION. If I may, Mr. Chairman, just echo that to the Member, the good-looking gentleman from Texas, we would be deeply appreciative for an additional \$70 million in Fair Housing Initiative funds that advanced safety in housing, both private and public. That is our challenge, doing that, and it is part of our mission to enforce the Fair Housing laws. We would deeply appreciate that.

And let me say that, very quickly, one of the problems that we face here, going back to Congressman Espaillat's comment about education, is that we get so few complaints from certain pockets of the population, from certain buildings. The number of complaints for self-closing doors was infinitesimally small. And now, with the Mayor's Executive Order that brings the Fire Department and the HPD together to address this issue and enhance education, this \$70 million would go a long way.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am grateful for the time, and I yield back.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from New York, Mr. Torres.

Mr. TORRES. Madam Borough President, you have been in City and State Government for more than a decade, and City and State Government can be siloed, and I worry about a lack of coordination and communication among the inspectors at various levels of government. Not only is Twin Parks North West subject to the housing code and the fire code and the building code, all of which have their own inspectors, but the tenants have Section 8 vouchers from three administrators—HPD, HCR, and NYCHA—all of which have their own inspection regimes. So, the patchwork of housing inspections is often more of a cacophony than a symphony. Do you share those concerns?

Ms. GIBSON. I do, and I think it is important that we continue to work together and have interagency coordination from HUD, from HCR, from HPD, and from the Mayor's Executive Order making sure that there is more consistency on inspections. When you hear the numbers—and I agree with Congressman Espaillat—we need to make sure that we are at our budgeting capacity on all of the inspectors that we have at HPD, and HCR, as well as FDNY, because it is really important. Tenants feel a sense of calling 311 multiple times and not getting any response, or it taking days for inspectors to come out, and by the time the inspectors come out, those issues are sometimes corrected, and sometimes, they are not.

I think that while we encourage New Yorkers to call 311, we have to make sure that there is a consistency on the inspectors

that are coming out and that the agencies are actually working together. I think in all of these tragedies, because since Twin Parks on January 9th, we have had a series of other fires far less fatal where we have not had any fatalities, thank God, but we have had a lot of displaced families. We have had fires in Morris Park, in Allerton, in Parkchester, and in other parts of the Bronx, and we have a number of families right now who are housed in area hotels.

And so, it has called into question not only the housing stock, the aging infrastructure of some of our housing stock, and the usage of safe space heaters that sometimes are not working and the faultiness of that, but also holding landlords accountable and making sure that they do the work that they are supposed to do. I agree that there has to be more coordination, and if we learn anything from Twin Parks, we have to learn that coordination is critically important in keeping affordable housing safe and essential for New Yorkers.

Mr. TORRES. And if I can squeeze in one more question to the Commissioners, what can the Federal Government do to create a system that enables all inspectors at every level of government to coordinate and communicate and talk to each other? How do we create more interoperability?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. I certainly think HUD convening us for a conversation like that would be incredible. As you said, with the HQS inspections being done by NYCHA, by HPD, and by HCR, as well as other Federal inspection regimes, I think making sure they are coordinated across them all and making sure that we are all coordinated up and down the chain, I think would be great. As we come out of an important hearing like this with things to do to make things better would really be an important first step in that effort.

Ms. KAVANAGH. Yes, I would agree with that, and also say that this data sharing between agencies at different levels is really important. Obviously, we have increased our coordination significantly under the Executive Order with our fellow City agencies, but getting that coordination and that data—our inspection regime is based on a risk-based algorithm. So, the more data that algorithm has about the experiences of residents, about the violations at maybe other levels of government that we don't have, makes our algorithm more powerful. It means we are getting to the buildings most in need more often.

Mr. CARRION. Congressman, I agree with those points made by my colleagues. We currently have task forces that we sit on at the local level that include the Department of Buildings, the Department of Investigations, the Fire Department, and the Department of Health and Mental Health, but that is at the local level. I think there is an opportunity for us to do it at different levels of government. When I served as HUD Regional Administrator, we convened locally the HCR Commissioner or the HPD Commissioner and the NYCHA Chair on a regular basis. That was just sort of a symbolic gesture at the time, and we tried to figure out how best to coordinate our efforts. But, in fact, at the national level across the many municipalities, the thousands of municipalities, if the Federal Government can step in and encourage and cajole that kind of activity, that would be very helpful.

Mr. TORRES. My time has expired.

Chairman CLEAVER. The gentlewoman from Pennsylvania, Ms. Dean, is now recognized for 2 minutes.

Ms. DEAN. Thanks so much, Mr. Chairman.

I will go back to something that Ms. Clayton said about warning systems, and that the fire alarm would go off so often as a false alarm in the building that they got to the point of not thinking it was an urgent call for the residents to get out.

Commissioner Carrion and Commissioner Kavanagh, could you speak to the state of play in public housing in New York around smoke detectors, hardwired or not, functioning within the buildings or not, and what your inspections showed there, what percentage of our public housing stock has safe, working smoke detectors?

Mr. CARRION. Congresswoman, thank you, and our condolences to you, from one city to another, on your loss on January 5th.

Our army of inspectors goes out every day. They did so right through the pandemic, nonstop, and they check nine very important items: lead, mold, carbon monoxide detectors, mice and roaches; and then they do a four-point test on fire safety: double cylinder locks, smoke detectors, illegal gates, and self-closing doors. By the way, HUD is now looking to add to their housing quality standard. If any of those systems is not working, we issue a violation right away. And on the smoke detectors and self-closing doors, those are to be corrected immediately.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I see my extra time has expired. I thank you for offering that to me. I yield back.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Dwight Evans.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to ask the president of the borough the same question I asked Ms. Kavanagh. Do you have any suggestions in terms of saying to Congress, incentivize building owners to improve safety measures? What would you suggest?

Ms. GIBSON. Thank you for the question. I definitely think that increasing more inspections in federally assisted HUD buildings would be great. I think having the Federal presence on the ground is a critical part of this work. I definitely think that access to additional HUD vouchers will be great.

What we have learned in Twin Parks is that many of the working families were not initially eligible for vouchers and many of them felt that they should be accommodated, although they have working income. But because of the trauma faced by the fire at Twin Parks—and they also think that there needs to be Federal intervention when it comes to the regulation of space heaters. Space heaters do not have automatic shutoffs, and sometimes, if you buy them in certain parts of our City, they are inexpensive but they are not necessarily the best quality. But families in our City are forced to use space heaters because of insufficient heat by their landlords and management companies.

I think if we had access to additional vouchers, as well as more Federal oversight in terms of inspections of self-closing doors and the regulation of space heaters, I think that would be a great step of progress.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you. I yield back the balance of my time.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from New York, Mr. Espailat.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Following up on the borough president and space heaters, it almost seems like a natural thought to me, having represented districts with the highest concentration of rent-stabilized apartments, and now the highest number of NYCHA units, that any time there is a fire, almost my automatic response is there must be a space heater involved in it. And it comes as a result of lack of heat, and it is not usually on the cold days. On really cold days, you get the heat. It is on days like today, not too cold, and not too warm.

Commissioner, could you give us the breakdown on what the regulations are of when landlords are supposed to provide heat, just a Heat 101 course?

Mr. CARRION. Congressman, I wish I could do the Heat 101 course. I will tell you in very general terms that our heat season starts in October and goes through the spring. I believe the temperature outside has to be below 55 for heat to be required, or something like that.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Fifty-five for the heat?

Mr. CARRION. I believe so. And again, the record might be corrected.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. So on a day like today, you are not getting any heat, but the temperature may dip down to 40 later on this afternoon.

Mr. CARRION. Yes.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. I think there is a problem there. I get a lot of complaints from seniors and families that they are not getting enough heat, and I think if the day starts at 55 or 57 degrees but it dips down to 40, at night it is going to be very cold, and they are going to turn on that heater, and that contributes to the number of fires. Is there anything that the City can do to regulate better, maybe increase the threshold for landlords to provide heat?

Mr. CARRION. I will tell you, not just as a Commissioner, but also having served on the City Council and as Borough President number 12, that this is an ongoing debate. Is the threshold temperature at the right place, and are the dates correct? I am not prepared to address that as Commissioner, but I certainly am interested in coming back to the committee with some expert advice.

Mr. ESPAILLAT. Let me just conclude, Mr. Chairman, and say that it is rampant, the numbers of complaints that I get in NYCHA buildings and rent-stabilized buildings about a lack of heat on days like today. Something is wrong there, and I think that is forcing families to go to the local store and buy that space heater that will then potentially, because of the bad quality of the equipment itself, and other matters as well, contribute to these tragic fires.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

We now recognize the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Green.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you again, Mr. Chairman. I did not thank you appropriately enough. This hearing is most important because this involves multiple places, not just one city, and it is important also

because we are losing lives. I don't know how we can allow what we see to happen and not make the kind of inquiry that you are making. So, I am eternally grateful to you for giving us this opportunity to address some of these issues.

Having listened to the questions and heard the responses, I have one final commentary, and it is that I stand ready and willing to work with my colleagues. We have a number of pieces of legislation proposed. Having had an opportunity to peruse them in a very cursory way, I find favor with them, and I look forward to seeing us flesh them out so that they can become a part of the healing process, and this is a great opportunity for us to do some good. I look forward to working with my colleagues on this good agenda.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you, Mr. Green.

Just as we close out this hearing—we normally don't do this, but, Ms. Clayton, is there a question that we did not ask? Is there a question that should be asked? Is there something that you want to know?

Ms. CLAYTON. Thank you. My question is, why is it that it is only once a year that the buildings or the apartments are inspected? Me personally, I think they should be inspected at least 3 times a year.

Chairman CLEAVER. Anybody else?

Ms. VISNAUSKAS. It is a great question to ask, and I think that we would all say that I think we are in lots of buildings multiple times, and I think that in the case of this building, certainly for our inspections, we didn't have any heat complaints. And so, there is also sort of a disconnect I think on some level between the lived experience of the people in the building and what is showing up on the inspection reports, and I think that is a complicated issue to tackle about the efficacy or what is required in the inspections, if we did them more, would we get more, if we still got the same outcome or not in the right place.

I think it is a great question to ask. I don't necessarily have an answer about doing it more as much as to sort of acknowledge that I think that there is a little bit of a disconnect in what we see when we go out there and what is actually happening, and we have to get at the root of that.

And I also think it goes back to investment in older housing stock, and we just have to be making sure that we are making capital investments in multifamily buildings occupied by low-income households, by seniors, by children, and by every vulnerable population we have in this City, to make sure that they are living in safe, warm apartments. It is essential, and that is a big ask of the Federal Government and for State and locals to do that kind of investment, but it is really at a crisis point and we need it.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

Ms. KAVANAGH. I think I would just second that, actually, and say that I think we had a good takeaway from this hearing, which is to meet with our Federal and State partners because the additional data, especially from the residents, can make a difference in how often we inspect a building.

Mr. CARRION. And if I can just close out with this: We had the same experience. We have a lot of visits to buildings, a lot of inspections. You heard the numbers, and they are huge, 620,000 vio-

lations, et cetera. But then we look at the history of a particular building and we find that there were 10 or 12 heat complaints. And then, this fire happens.

And so, I think there is an element here that is the tenant human element of maybe a fear of complaining for fear of reprisal that we are going to have to really deal with, and that is an issue for us to take up as we go forward.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you. Thank you very much, Ms. Clayton. Thank you for raising that issue. You are the person who is most impacted by the questions and the answers and the actions that are forthcoming.

I would like to thank all of you, all of the witnesses, for your testimony today.

We are going to take a 5-minute recess before the next panel, which is a panel from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

And let me thank all of the Members who are on the virtual screen. If you are able to stay, we appreciate it.

But we will take 5 minutes to change witnesses. Thank you.

[brief recess]

Chairman CLEAVER. —our first panel of testimony today. Next, we have Ms. Ashley Sheriff, who is the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary with the Real Estate Assessment Center at HUD, who will be appearing as a technical witness for us today.

As a reminder to our witnesses, you are limited to 5 minutes, and without objection, your written statements will be made a part of the record.

Ms. Ampy-Samuel, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to give an oral presentation of your testimony.

STATEMENT OF ALICKA AMPRY-SAMUEL, REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR, REGION II, DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT (HUD), ACCOMPANIED BY ASHLEY SHERIFF, ACTING DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, REAL ESTATE ASSESSMENT CENTER, DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you so much. Chairman Cleaver and members of the committee, I am honored to have been invited to address the Committee on Financial Services.

Appointed by President Biden, I serve as the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's Regional Administrator for New York and New Jersey. I was born in Brooklyn and grew up in NYCHA public housing, so the opportunity to address you all today on matters of safety in HUD housing is particularly personal. Prior to serving HUD Secretary Fudge and President Biden, I had the honor of representing Brooklyn as the City Councilwoman for the New York City Council District 41, which has the largest concentration of public housing in the country.

Above all else, I want to first offer my condolences to the families of the victims of the tragic fire at Twin Parks North West and let them know that HUD continues to do whatever it can to support you in this time of grief and need. And thank you, Ms. Clayton, for sharing your story. No loss of life due to fires or other health haz-

ards, wherever it occurs, is acceptable to us, and we grieve with you, and we are here to support you.

While it is beyond our authorities to manage fire prevention in every home, HUD takes very seriously the role we play in fire and safety standards in HUD-assisted housing. As a former NYCHA resident, I am extremely passionate about carrying forward this work that is a top priority for Secretary Fudge. Although we can sadly not change the events that made this hearing necessary, I am here today to discuss the substantial work HUD is doing to make its housing safer in the Bronx, in Philadelphia, and in all communities nationwide.

In March of 2020, HUD paused its health and safety inspections due to the risk of COVID exposure. In April of 2021, Secretary Fudge announced that HUD would resume health and safety inspections of its approximately 35,000 multifamily and public housing properties on June 1st of 2021. Secretary Fudge set a bold goal for HUD of completing inspections of all multifamily and public housing properties by September 30, 2023. I am pleased to report that since restarting inspections, HUD has inspected over 13,000 multifamily and public housing properties and is ahead of schedule for inspecting 100 percent of these properties by September 30th of 2023. This would be the first time HUD has done this in an approximately 2-year span.

HUD has made tremendous progress to substantially improve its physical inspections across all HUD-assisted housing. In this effort, the National Standards for the Physical Inspection of Real Estate, known as NSPIRE, would emphasize resident health and safety and standardize inspection requirements across HUD's rental programs, as opposed to the two standards that are used today. NSPIRE also includes several new and more stringent health and safety requirements for smoke alarms, carbon monoxide detectors, fire doors, electrical systems, and infestation. NSPIRE would provide an opportunity for tenants to provide formal feedback about their unit's condition that could be used to prioritize inspections and address urgent concerns.

For fire safety, NSPIRE standards would implement the National Fire Protection Association 72, which is the preeminent national standard for smoke detectors and fire signaling. It also would establish a minimum temperature requirement and require a permanent heating source, allowing residents to live more comfortably and be less reliant on supplemental heat sources.

In conclusion, I thank you for your attention and dedication to keeping our HUD families safe. HUD shares this commitment, and we know that there is more that the Federal Government must do. Beyond inspections, much of the public and multifamily housing stock is in need of significant repairs and renovation. President Biden and Secretary Fudge stand behind House-passed proposals to significantly increase funding that will restore housing developments across the country so that people can live in safe, healthy housing of which they can be proud.

On behalf of Secretary Fudge, HUD appreciates your ongoing support of NSPIRE initiatives; and as the new HUD Regional Administrator, I thank you for holding a field hearing in this community, my community, that has suffered such tremendous tragedy at

Twin Parks North West. I look forward to working with you to serve this community. It was an honor to speak with you, and I am happy to answer any questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ampy-Samuel can be found on page 40 of the appendix.]

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much, and let me congratulate you on your appointment to this significant position.

I represent Kansas City, Missouri, and we are having an issue right now with one of our major developments failing an inspection. I want to just, if I can, spend my 5 minutes dealing with this issue of inspections. And I recognize that you have only been doing the job for a short period of time, but how many HUD-assisted properties received a failing score during their last inspection, and what percentage of the total HUD-assisted portfolio does this represent?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for that question. Because it is such a technical issue, I would like to have the Deputy Assistant Secretary, Ash Sheriff, respond to that question.

Chairman CLEAVER. Okay. Thank you.

Ms. SHERIFF. Great. Thank you, Chairman Cleaver, and thank you for the opportunity to be here today. It is an honor to participate in this hearing. And thank you for your attention to these issues.

Approximately 5 percent, a little less than 5 percent of properties fail our Real Estate Assessment Center (REAC) inspections, at least based on the most recent REAC inspections conducted of both the public housing and the multifamily portfolios. Certainly, we at HUD view any failing property as problematic, and we want to get that number to zero percent ultimately, where we have no failing properties.

But unfortunately, we do have failing properties, and you mentioned one in your community of Kansas City, Parade Park Homes East, which we are very well aware of, and certainly we want to do everything we can within our power at HUD in terms of both using our inspections as well as our other oversight monitoring and enforcement tools to make sure that we are raising the level of housing in our properties.

Certainly, as has been discussed on the previous panel, as well as in this forum in the Regional Administrator's opening statement, HUD housing is in need of investment, and 73 percent of our housing was built before 1984, at least for the public housing portfolio, and declining investment in public housing results in declining physical condition. So, we work with our housing partners to help them do what they can to maintain safe and healthy housing, and the inspections are one part of it, but there are other components to ensuring that housing is safe, healthy, and of good quality for our HUD families.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you. Parade Park actually should have failed the REAC inspection. Had they passed it, I would have been here with another whole list of questions and issues and anger.

But what happens when a housing choice voucher unit receives a failing inspection? What is the next step, and then, the next step?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. I am going to have to ask our Deputy Assistant Secretary to respond to that one too, because it is a very technical question.

Ms. SHERIFF. Sure, and thank you again, Chairman Cleaver. When a housing choice voucher unit or a voucher unit fails inspection, it depends on whether or not the unit is occupied at that time. Prior to a family moving into a unit, a housing quality standard inspection is required to take place. If that inspection results in a failed unit, the family is not allowed or the household is not allowed to occupy that unit. If it is one of, for example, the annual housing quality standard inspections that take place typically and a family is already in the unit, there are multiple requirements in place to ensure that unit is brought up to the conditions that we expect and meets our health and safety standards.

First and foremost, they have to address the health and safety issues within 24 hours. That is a requirement across all of our inspection protocols. Where life-threatening defects have been identified, it is HUD's expectation that those are remediated as quickly as possible, and those need to be certified to either HUD or the public housing agency that administers those vouchers.

For other defects, they typically have to be addressed within 30 days. If the defects, Chairman Cleaver, are not remediated in the timeframe specified by HUD, HUD has a number of tools at its disposal and works with its public housing agencies accordingly, and PHAs, and it is important to recognize that PHAs manage the contract with the owners and landlords of those units. But under HUD requirements, those PHAs could abate those housing assistance payments (HAPs) to owners/landlords, and that is a compelling way to bring about the changes and the remediation necessary.

In extreme circumstances where the housing assistance payments have been abated, and these deficiencies have not been corrected, the PHA should terminate the contract and find an alternative rental unit for the family.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes Mr. Green of Texas for 5 minutes.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for your kindness and for your caring as well.

I am most appreciative to you, Madam Regional Administrator, for indicating that you are sympathetic with the plight of persons who are suffering at this time. It means something to me to hear that come from you as an Administrator.

I am concerned about the inspections, and I am appreciative that you are doing what you can through NSPIRE to improve standards. I think this is important, and I believe that the Fair Housing Initiative Program (FHIP), as I mentioned earlier, is of great benefit in this process. We have tried in Congress to make sure that FHIP is properly funded such that it can be of assistance to you. The Fair Housing Initiative Program allows for some help for you, help with enforcement. Can you just address how the Fair Housing Initiative Program, or Ms. Sheriff as the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary, how this program helps you with the enforcement as it relates to these issues that we are confronting?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. Thank you so much, Congressman, for that question, and it is something that we discuss all the time. Entities

that receive FHIP resources help people who believe they have been victims of housing discrimination, which includes when the protected group has limited access to high-quality, safe, accessible housing. And on health and safety, FHIP organizations can play a critical role in raising awareness of emerging issues in communities to Federal, State, and local governments, as well as assisting with fair housing investigations that seek to remedy such concerns. Resources for FHIP entities allow them to advertise their services, and educate tenants on their rights, and all of these things can have a deterrent effect if there is something going wrong or potential wrongdoers.

So, assistance and being able to get funding around these resources, in particular for the Fair Housing Initiative Program, is critical, and I am not sure if the Deputy Assistant Secretary wants to jump in, if I am leaving anything out, but this is very critical and needed, and this is something that we discuss all the time.

Mr. GREEN. Thank you. I welcome any commentary from the Deputy Assistant Secretary if she has some.

Ms. SHERIFF. I think the Regional Administrator covered it very well, and certainly I will add with respect to inspections in particular that we believe what we are trying to do under NSPIRE is very much aligned with what we are trying to do to promote fair housing and fair housing outcomes for residents.

We know that 66 percent of residents of public and assisted HUD housing are members of communities of color, and it is critical that their housing is as safe and decent and sanitary as the housing that is available to market-ready residents. And so, we have made that a priority of what we are trying to do with NSPIRE, and we have had resident workshops, and worked with our Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, and they have commented on our standards, and we believe that the lived experiences of those residents are absolutely critical to developing our NSPIRE standards and making sure that those standards promote housing that is fair and equal with other residential housing that is available to market-rate renters and owners.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you very much, Ms. Sheriff.

And we will now recognize the gentleman who is responsible for requesting that we do this hearing, the gentleman from New York, Mr. Torres.

Mr. TORRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Regional Director Ampy-Samuel, before you were the Regional Director, before I was a Congressman, before Vanessa Gibson was the Borough President, we were all on the City Council and we passed a law that established a New York City heat sensor program. Heat sensors have the ability to monitor and report heating levels in apartments in real time so that you can hold landlords accountable for providing tenants with heat and hot water. During the heating season of 2020 to 2021, the HPD pilot program led to the installation of heat sensors in 26 buildings with a history of heat violations and complaints. Among those buildings with heat sensors, complaints fell by 56 percent. Among those buildings with heat sensors, seven buildings had one violation, two buildings had two violations, and none of the buildings had more than two viola-

tions. Indeed, one building had 500 fewer heat complaints than it did in the previous heating season.

Given the success of the City's local heat sensor program, would HUD support the creation of a Federal heat sensor program?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. Thank you so much, Congressman Torres. And I just have to say in this quick moment of time that it is an honor to be in this position before you as a Member of Congress.

HUD shares your commitment to fire safety, and I know that our HUD headquarters has been engaged with your staff, your team, and your committee as it relates to the proposed bills, and we all are working towards the same goals. And I have to say that with NSPIRE—and I know we have talked about this before—those standards also contain enhanced fire safety standards which address many of the issues that you have outlined, and we are doing that now. We have rolled out NSPIRE as a pilot program to be fully introduced by 2023 across all of our properties. And so, we are doing that under NSPIRE.

But I can say that our staff, our team at HUD headquarters will continue to engage with your committee so that we can all be working towards the same goal.

Mr. TORRES. As you know, I have legislation that would require self-closing doors in federally funded affordable housing developments. But earlier, Commissioner Carrion from the New York City Housing Department, the Housing Preservation Development Agency, testified that HUD was moving in the direction of mandating self-closing doors as part of HQS standards by rule, by regulation. Is that accurate, and what is the timeline for finalizing such a rule?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. I will ask Ash Sheriff to chime in on that. But I did want to say quickly that there are, and I recognize just from your previous comments that there are several standards, safety standards. We have HQS, we have REAC, we have the UPCS. So again, with NSPIRE, it would be a way to make that more consistent across HUD-assisted and unassisted properties. But I will have the Deputy Assistant Secretary chime in.

Ms. SHERIFF. Thank you, Congressman Torres. We have greatly appreciated working with your committee, and we have evaluated the legislation through the formal technical drafting service process. You are correct that under the NSPIRE regulations that are proposed right now, we will be increasing the standards and including a requirement for self-closing fire doors, and that will apply to all HUD housing. So, it will apply to the public housing portfolio, the multifamily portfolio, and voucher units. Where our standards are not aligned today, NSPIRE will align our standards for all types of HUD housing, so that wherever you live, if you are a resident of HUD housing, your unit will be subject to the same, more stringent requirements that we are proposing under NSPIRE, and that includes for self-closing fire doors, that includes—

Mr. TORRES. What is the timeline? Just to interject.

Ms. SHERIFF. Yes, I apologize. We hope to have NSPIRE implemented by the end of Fiscal Year 2023, September 30, 2023. However, I will say we are already conducting NSPIRE demonstration inspections and have done over 400 of those inspections so far.

Mr. TORRES. My time is actually running out, so I just wanted to check in. I pointed out earlier that government is heavily siloed. There is a patchwork of housing inspections at every level of government. I will take as an example Twin Parks North West. Not only is Twin Parks North West subject to the fire code and the building code and the housing code, all of which have their own inspectors, but the tenants have vouchers from three State and local Section 8 administrators—HPD, NYCHA, and HDR. And there is no system to ensure that these inspectors are coordinating and communicating and talking to each other.

Is HUD willing to play a role in convening all of these inspection regimes in the hopes of creating a system that breaks down these silos and enables these inspectors to talk to each other?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. Congressman, I wanted to mention that Commissioner Carrion mentioned that when he was the Regional Administrator, he started these quarterly meetings, and those meetings have not stopped. And as the new Regional Administrator, I too will continue with those quarterly meetings so that everyone will be able to sit at the table and be able to discuss what is happening and work together towards the safety standards, and I have already started. I had my first meeting with HPD and HDC and the Mayor's Office, and so we are starting that, we started that about a month ago. And we are committed to making sure that we are having these quarterly meetings so that we can have a more consistent way of having safety standards for our residents.

Mr. TORRES. I see my time has expired. Thank you so much.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes Congresswoman Dean for 5 minutes.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman, again for convening now this second panel to talk about these critically important issues to all of our communities. And I want to thank our public servants in HUD. Thank you for the extraordinarily important work that you do, and thank you for sharing your knowledge and experience and information with us today.

I had talked with the previous panel about the twin tragedies: on January 5th in Philadelphia, the rowhouse fire killing twelve, three sisters and nine of their children; and, of course, the fire that we are more focused on today. I am wondering if HUD, following those tragedies within days of each other, had any emergency meetings or after-action items that took place as a result of these twin tragedies, recognizing that there are many other fires and other tragedies, but these were just so striking. Was there any action by HUD in response to the two fires?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. Thank you. Thank you so much, Congresswoman, for your question. Again, my condolences to the families in Philadelphia as well.

There is a procedure at HUD when there are incidents to this level and we are talking about tragedy and disasters, these fires, that is something that is automatically flagged by our Secretary herself, and our Deputy Secretary. HUD reached out to the public housing agency in Philadelphia. HUD reached out immediately to folks on the ground in the Bronx, and we had meetings right away. But because I wasn't there at that particular time, I was not the Regional Administrator, I will ask the Deputy Assistant Secretary

to step in. But I know that just from briefings today, we are still briefing every single day about the fires. There is a weekly meeting held to make sure that families are receiving the services that they are supposed to be receiving. But I will have the Deputy Assistant Secretary step in.

Ms. SHERIFF. Thank you, Congresswoman Dean. Yes, I was in my capacity at the time, and there were several emergency meetings immediately once we found out about both of those terrible tragedies, and I share my condolences as well. And we continue to meet on a daily basis about what we can do to prevent those types of tragedies in the future, in addition to providing kind of localized assistance to the families. We have started looking at everything that we can do from a health and safety standpoint, not just through NSPIRE, but are there more short-term things that we can do. We have offered assistance to the housing agencies that were involved in both cases, and we have even offered up our inspectors to come up and supplement inspections of those particular housing agencies.

So, this is something we take very seriously. As the head of the Real Estate Assessment Center, I can honestly say that week was the worst week of my professional career. We take these issues very seriously, and we want to do what we can to prevent these types of tragedies in the future.

Ms. DEAN. I appreciate that. And something else I was thinking about in terms of your work and reviews of these tragedies and your assistance is the state of the art on sprinkler systems. We know, for example, in the Philadelphia fire, what I understand from reading and speaking to those on the ground is it was an extremely fast-moving fire, and had there been a working sprinkler system, it could have prevented some of that horror, maybe put the fire out well in advance. I get that fire sprinkler systems, retrofitting older buildings, is expensive, and I know in both public housing and private housing there are going to be property owners, landlords resistant to that. I have combated that at the local level in my own communities where a property owner is fully renovating a building but doesn't want to go to the expense of putting in sprinkler systems, as he or she should.

I am a co-sponsor of legislation by Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, the Public Housing Fire Safety Act, that would create a HUD grant program for public housing agencies to install automatic sprinkler systems. I know my time is running low, but can you speak to that legislation and HUD's perspective on moving us into the next century and retrofitting buildings with sprinkler systems?

Ms. SHERIFF. Congresswoman Dean, I can answer that. We welcome any efforts and corresponding funding to retrofit HUD housing and bring HUD housing up to better physical condition with modern technologies like fire suppression systems such as sprinkler systems. And certainly, the aging/aged housing that we have in our portfolio is extremely expensive to retrofit. However, that doesn't mean that it shouldn't be something that should be addressed. And if you look at the language of the 1992 Fire Administration Act, it says that any new construction and/or substantially rebuilt construction should be built with these types of systems in place.

Because HUD housing is old, and because we have not been able to keep up with the backlog of physical needs, it has been hard to do those substantial rebuilds that would be required. But certainly, those types of systems have proven to be extremely effective in protecting life in these circumstances.

Ms. DEAN. We will keep fighting for that, and I admire my colleague for putting forward the legislation.

Again, thank you both for your work, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Dwight Evans.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate HUD's effort to respond to the fatal fires in my congressional district in Philadelphia, and Mr. Torres' leadership that he has taken not just in his particular district but for what is occurring.

To the Regional Administrator, I would like to ask you, can you explain the connection between Federal disinvestment, affordable housing shortages, and the increase in the fire risk?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. Thank you so much, Congressman, for your question. Yes, we know that far too many people with low incomes, especially people of color with low incomes, live in deteriorating housing, and affordable housing is scarce in Brooklyn and in Pennsylvania, and we must preserve whatever affordable housing that we absolutely can.

President Biden supports increased funding to rehabilitate/redevelop public and private affordable housing, and we know that was part of the Build Back Better legislation, which included \$170 billion for affordable housing investments. But we also know that there is increased fire risk in older housing stock because safety standards have to be evolved, they have to be modernized, and that is what we keep talking about over and over and over, that even though we have this deteriorating housing stock, we need to make sure that our safety standards are speaking about the issues that we see today. And as we renovate or redevelop housing, we also bring that housing up to modern-day safety standards.

So, more funding is needed. I can talk about that over and over and over, but that funding will help us to improve fire safety and other health and safety concerns for our residents. And there is a connection between Federal housing investments and fire risk, and we know that requires, like we have been talking about today, more funding and more modern safety standards.

Mr. EVANS. I would like to piggyback quickly, in your view or in HUD's position, what are the consequences of the Senate's failure to advance the Build Back Better Act on this critical housing investment?

Ms. AMPRY-SAMUEL. The consequences are a matter of health and safety, life and death. This hearing today is about tragic fires where there was a loss of life for children and families in two States. We need funding, and we share that commitment. We share that commitment in making sure that our units are safe. But it is definitely a detrimental impact if we don't have the funding that we need. And ultimately, when Congress is able to make substan-

tial investments into affordable housing, we know that our families will be safe and this conversation around fire safety and folks dying because of it will be addressed. We need more funding, and the problem is if it is not addressed—it passed in the House and did not pass in the Senate, so we need more support. It is detrimental to life.

Mr. EVANS. I yield back. I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this hearing, and my colleague for his leadership. I really appreciate it, as well as Chairwoman Maxine Waters. But just having this discussion, I think is fantastic. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman CLEAVER. Thank you.

Let me also thank Administrator Ampy-Samuel. Thank you very much. And again, congratulations on President Biden's appointment to you for this region. And, Ms. Sheriff, thank you very much for your participation.

I would also like to thank my colleagues, Mr. Green from Texas, Ms. Dean, and of course the gentleman of great distinction from Philadelphia, Mr. Dwight Evans.

And I would like to thank Maxine Waters, the Chairwoman of the Financial Services Committee, for her willingness to allow us to do this hearing. And I have to say that I have been around for a while, and Maxine Waters is about as close to a Tasmanian Devil as you can get when it comes to affordable housing. She is obsessed with it, which I love, which is why I am on this committee. And we were certainly given additional fuel when Mr. Ritchie Torres was appointed to this committee, and I am thrilled that he is here, and I am also thrilled that he asked that we come to the Bronx to deal with this issue that should be painful to every single American.

Frankly, if we do nothing, I think we are guilty of whatever happens down the road. We need to move, and we need to move quickly, and that is one of the reasons I think this legislation that the President has put before us is extremely important. We have to approve that so that we can begin to deal with these problems.

We can still do big things in the United States of America. We can still do those things. We have to put some pettiness aside and understand that you cannot sting and make honey at the same time. You have to choose what you want to do. I choose honey.

The Chair notes that some Members may have additional questions for these witnesses, which they may wish to submit in writing. Without objection, the hearing record will remain open for 5 legislative days for Members to submit written questions to these witnesses and to place their responses in the record. Also, without objection, Members will have 5 legislative days to submit extraneous materials to the Chair for inclusion in the record.

Thank you very much. This hearing is now ended.

[Whereupon, at 2:27 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

April 20, 2022

**Written Testimony of Alicka Ampy-Samuel
Regional Administrator
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Before the U.S. House Committee on Financial Services
Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance**

April 20, 2022

Introduction

Chairman Cleaver, Ranking Member Hill, and members of the Committee, I am honored to have been invited to address the Committee on Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance.

Appointed by President Biden, I serve as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Regional Administrator for New York and New Jersey. I was born in Brooklyn and grew up in New York City Housing Authority or NYCHA public housing, so the opportunity to address you all today on matters of safety in HUD housing is particularly personal. Prior to serving Secretary Fudge and President Biden, I had the honor of representing Brooklyn as the City Councilwoman for NYC Council District 41, which has the largest concentration of public housing in the country. In this capacity, I also chaired the Public Housing committee.

Above all else, I want to first offer my condolences to the families of the victims of the tragic fire at Twin Parks Northwest and let them know HUD continues to do whatever it can to support you in this time of grief and need. HUD also continues to support the families of similar tragedies in other communities. No loss of life due to fires or other health hazards, wherever it occurs, is acceptable to us and we grieve with you.

While it is beyond our authorities to manage fire prevention in every home, HUD takes very seriously the role we play in fire and safety standards in HUD-assisted housing. As a former NYCHA resident, I am extremely passionate on carrying forward this work that is a top priority for Secretary Fudge. HUD housing must be as safe, high quality, accessible and available as any housing available to those households with greater economic means. And this must apply for all communities of color and LGBTQIA+ populations, persons with disabilities, cultural and immigrant communities, Tribes and Tribal Nations, and other groups that struggle to find housing such as survivors of domestic violence and people experiencing homelessness. HUD housing must be an engine and innovator for equality and safe residency and that is what we work for every day.

Although we can sadly not change the events that made this hearing necessary, I am here today to discuss the substantial work HUD is doing to make its housing safer in the Bronx and in all communities nationwide.

Inspecting Every Property HUD Assists

In March 2020, HUD paused its health and safety inspections when it became clear that sending an inspector into a family's unit put both the inspector and the family at risk of COVID exposure. In April 2021, Secretary Fudge announced that HUD would resume health and safety inspections of its approximately 35,000 Multifamily and Public Housing properties on June 1st, 2021. When announcing the restart, Secretary Fudge said: "...we must take steps to ensure the whole health and well-being of the households we serve—including the conditions and quality of housing."

Secretary Fudge set a bold goal for HUD: the Department's 2022-2026 strategic plan includes completing inspections of all Multifamily and Public Housing properties by September 30, 2023. I am pleased to report that since restarting inspections, ***HUD has inspected over 13,000 Multifamily and Public Housing properties which is the largest number of inspections ever conducted in such a short period of time.*** In just the first year of Secretary Fudge resuming inspections, HUD has inspected more than 37 percent of Public Housing and Multifamily properties that HUD inspects, and HUD is ahead of schedule for inspecting 100 percent of these properties by September 30, 2023. If HUD stays this course towards achieving our goal, this would be the first time HUD has inspected all its Public Housing and Multifamily properties in an approximately two-year span.

For privately-owned buildings receiving Project-based Voucher assistance such as Twin Parks Northwest, HUD has also resumed requiring housing quality standards (HQS) inspections that were paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Local public housing agencies, or PHAs, perform multiple inspections of such buildings as part of the conversion to PBVs, and inspect the units at turnover and at least biennially.

Improving HUD's Inspection Program: The National Standard for the Physical Inspection of Real Estate (NSPIRE)

HUD has made tremendous progress on its efforts to substantially improve its physical inspections across all HUD-assisted housing. This effort, the National Standards for the Physical Inspection of Real Estate (NSPIRE) is currently at the proposed rule and demonstration stage and would substantially emphasize resident health and safety compared to the physical condition standards in use today, the Uniform Physical Condition Standard (UPCS) for about 3.3 million Public Housing and Multifamily properties and the Housing

Quality Standards (HQS) for approximately 2.4 million voucher units. Both the UPCS and HQS standards were created over 20 years ago and the science behind what constitutes a healthy residential environment has evolved substantially, especially for fire safety and environmental health.

As part of developing NSPIRE, HUD has undertaken substantial outreach to residents and resident advocacy groups, housing providers, and experts in residential safety. In 2021 alone, HUD conducted 36 virtual workshops, which included more than 1,400 attendees spanning residents; public housing, multifamily, and voucher housing providers; academia, and public health experts. HUD has continued this outreach throughout the development of NSPIRE and believes the lived experiences of residents and stakeholder perspectives are essential to improving the health and safety of its housing.

Per the direction of Congress and this Committee specifically, NSPIRE is intended to standardize these requirements across HUD's various rental programs and the approach is such that there would be one physical condition and health and safety standard that applies to all HUD rental assistance housing, as opposed to the two used now. As reflected in the demonstration and rulemaking process, we support the framework that all HUD housing should be subject to the same standards. The new standards would specify seven areas of health and safety concerns including: 1) fire safety; 2) water safety; 3) mold/moisture; 4) carbon monoxide; 5) infestation; 6) lead-based paint; and 7) structural concerns.

The NSPIRE demonstration also includes several new and more stringent health and safety requirements for smoke alarms, carbon monoxide detectors, fire doors, electrical systems, dryer exhausts, infestation, guardrails and handrails. NSPIRE would also provide an

opportunity for tenants to provide formal feedback about the conditions of their units that could be used to prioritize inspections and address urgent concerns.

HUD has made great strides on implementing the NSPIRE demonstration through conducting more than 300 NSPIRE demonstration inspections using the proposed NSPIRE standards since October 2021. HUD plans to conduct up to 4,500 of these inspections which will be integral to learning more about how we keep households safe.

Enhanced Fire Safety Requirements

For fire safety, NSPIRE standards would implement the National Fire Protection Association 72, which is the preeminent national standard for smoke detectors and fire signaling. It also would establish a minimum temperature requirement and require a permanent heating source, allowing residents to live more comfortably and ideally be less reliant on supplemental heat sources, such as space heaters, which can often be fire and carbon monoxide hazards. The proposed new standards, which should be available for public comment by Fall, will also include:

- More stringent and specific fire safety door requirements;
- New fire sprinkler standards including for the proper functioning of these systems;
- New safety defects for GFCI & AFCI protection of electrical systems;
- Required carbon monoxide alarms; and
- New safety defects for dryer exhausts.

Remediation and Enforcement

NSPIRE would include additional remediation and enforcement activities related to three categories of health and safety defects compared to the single health and safety deficiency category used today. Under NSPIRE, deficiencies classified as “Life Threatening” or “Severe, Non-Life Threatening” must be corrected within 24 hours, and those that are classified as “Standard” such as infestation or a damaged bedroom or closet door, must be corrected within 30 days. If these defects are not addressed within the timeframes prescribed, HUD may take enforcement actions such as re-inspection and referrals to the Departmental Enforcement Center.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I thank you for your attention and dedication to keeping our HUD families safe. HUD shares this commitment, and we know that there is more that the federal government must do. Beyond inspections, we know that much of the public and multifamily housing stock is in need of significant repairs and renovation, and the President’s 2023 Budget provides critical capital investments toward this goal.

On behalf of Secretary Fudge, HUD appreciates your ongoing support of the NSPIRE initiative and all the work that many of us are trying to do to promote better, safer housing and equality in healthy and safe housing for all populations. And as the new HUD Regional Administrator, I thank you for holding a field hearing in this community, my community, that has suffered such tremendous tragedy at Twin Parks Northwest. I look forward to working with you to serve this community. It was an honor to speak before you and I am happy to take any questions.

**Testimony of the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development
Commissioner Adolfo Carrión**

**A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally
Assisted Housing**

House Committee on Financial Services

Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance

April 20, 2022

Good afternoon, Chair Cleaver, Congressman Torres, and other members of the Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance. I am Adolfo Carrión, Commissioner at the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (“HPD”). The Twin Parks fire was an incredible tragedy, and we are grateful that you are continuing to focus on the important topic of fire safety as we all work to prevent future fires. We thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I want to take a moment to reiterate that the deadly fire that took place at the Twin Parks North West affordable housing development in the Bronx on Sunday, January 9, 2022 was a devastating tragedy, and our hearts go out to Ms. Clayton who is with us today and all of the residents affected. The City’s heroic firefighters, EMS workers, and first responders sprung into action within minutes, saving many lives. But we continue to mourn the 17 New Yorkers, including 8 children, whose lives were lost that day.

Since then, Mayor Eric Adams and teams from across New York City including HPD have been working tirelessly to respond to this tragedy. Our first priority has been to attend to the immediate needs of these families. Teams from HPD were staffed at the Emergency Management Service Center and have been coordinating with the building owner, the American Red Cross, the New York State Division of Homes and Community Renewal (“HCR”), and our fellow City Agencies to ensure displaced residents have temporary and long-term housing. As Twin Parks is a State-financed property with project-based Section 8 administered by HCR, our colleagues at HCR have taken the lead in working with the residents to identify permanent housing options for any households who did not wish to return to the building. In close coordination with HCR, HPD has been actively working with our partners in the affordable housing community to identify permanent housing options. Despite an outpouring of support from the community and public through the Mayor’s Fund for Twin Parks and concentrated efforts by numerous agencies and organizations, that process remains challenging in large part due to the long-standing housing crisis that has put a safe, affordable home out of reach for far too many New Yorkers. HPD continues to work on multiple fronts to invest in the physical and financial health of our public and affordable housing stock, to produce new affordable housing, and to take a coordinated, aggressive approach to protecting tenants from unsafe living conditions.

HPD takes our role in ensuring the safety of New York City renters extremely seriously. We respond to complaints about a lack of heat, hot water, electricity and running water, among almost 200 additional conditions. Because we have so many important responsibilities, we recognize the need to be surgical in our approach to enforcement beyond the response to complaints. We have programs targeted at buildings that are consistently not up to code. We respond to the concerns of community groups and elected officials about apartment and building-wide issues where tenants are afraid to file complaints for fear of reprisal. Our Housing Litigation Division brings cases in Housing Court against owners who do not remedy outstanding violations and, when necessary, seeks findings of contempt against recalcitrant landlords. And we pair aggressive enforcement actions against bad landlords with programs to provide support to property owners who want to do well by their tenants but may not have the means or the resources to do so.

In addition to HPD's response to complaints, HPD inspectors proactively look for and issue violations for multiple health and safety issues, regardless of whether HPD has received tenant complaints. These issues include lead, mold, carbon monoxide detectors, mice and roaches, double cylinder locks, self-closing doors, smoke detectors and illegal gates.

Because we need tenants and owners to be partners with us in keeping tenants safe, we look forward to continuing to educate them about their rights and responsibilities. As part of its general outreach strategy, HPD educates tenants and owners about health and safety requirements during our general communications with tenants and owners, through updates to our *ABCs of Housing* information guide, which is available in more than 10 languages, and on our webpage on Fire Safety. HPD also conducts regular outreach to owners of the affordable properties it supervises as part of its own subsidized portfolio and strives to ensure that buildings are safe and free of any potential fire hazards. Most recently, HPD issued a directive to the owners and managers of the Mitchell-Lama projects that are under HPD's supervision reminding them of the requirements to post fire safety notices and plans. During site visits, Mitchell-Lama coordinators will monitor their projects for compliance, and we will continue providing training and guidance to owners, managers and residents on fire prevention and safety awareness measures.

I want to stress the role that federal resources play in all these efforts. We are very appreciative of the millions in housing assistance allocated to New York City from the federal government during the past two years. However, additional federal resources and tools are needed to combat a housing crisis that forces far too many New Yorkers to pay too much of their income towards rent or to live in over-crowded or unsafe conditions.

More than ever, the City needs additional funding to protect the quality and longevity of our critical public and affordable housing infrastructure, to provide desperately needed rental assistance, to bolster local housing code enforcement, and to assist small landlords in properly maintaining their properties to ensure the health and safety of tenants. We were encouraged that significant housing investments were included in the Build Back Better Act passed by the House, and that President Biden's Fiscal Year 2023 budget request to Congress includes funds for increasing the affordable housing supply. This funding would increase local capacity for building inspections and code enforcement and provide low-income families and individuals with the stability needed to thrive, while furthering neighborhood revitalization across the country.

Given the tragic event at Twin Parks, we know more can and must be done to protect our fellow New Yorkers. In response to Mayor Adams' Executive Order 12, we are proud to strengthen our partnership with the Fire Department around outreach and education, data collection and sharing, and strategies for enhanced enforcement of the fire code. We have similarly strong partnerships with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Department of Buildings around issues where both agencies have jurisdiction, and these partnerships have strengthened our enforcement and education initiatives. We believe, as Mayor Adams has stressed repeatedly in his discussions of this issue, that education for both property owners and tenants about how to stay safe and what to do in the event of a fire will go a long way towards preventing tragedies like the one at Twin Parks – so that tenants and owners both understand the importance of self-closing doors and to make sure that tenants know whom to contact if their door is not closing properly.

In closing, I want to reenforce the City's commitment to protecting the health and safety of all New Yorkers. We truly believe that each family deserves access to safe and equitable housing, and we appreciate your continued partnership to achieve this goal. Your support and attention remain critical as we work together to address the housing needs of New Yorkers and their families. Thank you for taking time to have this important discussion; we look forward to further collaboration on improving and preserving our existing affordable housing stock for future generations.

Thank you for your time and we look forward to your questions.

Testimony of Sandra Clayton
“A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing”
 Field Hearing
 Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development, and Insurance
 House Financial Services Committee
 Wednesday, April 20, 2022
 Bronx, New York

Chair Cleaver, Ranking Member Hill, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about my experiences at the Twin Parks North West apartment building.

On January 9, a fire in my building took the lives of 17 residents. The fire started when a portable heater fell on a mattress and ignited, and it spread because the doors were propped open. But tenants had been living in dangerous conditions for years, and the property owners swept it under the rug. Their neglect led to this fire.

I was a tenant in the building for 26 years. Over that time, I saw my building deteriorate. For years, the heat wasn't working properly. I kept four space heaters in my apartment to stay warm. Everyone I know had space heaters. I used to put plastic covers over the A/C vents to prevent the cold air from coming through. Before this tragic event, my building was not perfect, but some issues should have been addressed, like proper working heat.

Before the fire, the front doors of the building were not operating properly, and the building's alarm system was malfunctioning as it would go off at night. When the fire alarm went off in January, I assumed it was nothing because I was so used to the alarm going off. The only reason why I knew there was an issue and was able to get out safely is because my neighbor yelled down the hallway, "Fire! Fire!" If not for my neighbor, who knows what would have happened.

After the fire, the Red Cross, Bronx Works, and other organizations were very generous. They gave me furniture, bedsheets, and pots and pans. I am so grateful.

My whole life changed after the fire. I have been receiving counseling services, and I have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I watched people who were being resuscitated and were not responding. My ex-girlfriend had tubes down her throat for weeks. I'm getting physical therapy now because I hurt my leg. I'm thankful that I made it out alive, but I'm sad for those who didn't.

During the fire, I lost my dog. I was trying to save myself, my ex-girlfriend, and my dog, but I couldn't. I am so hurt inside, even if I walk around with a smile on.

I'm at a new apartment now. I feel safer now. My apartment has a sprinkler system, and I can control my own heat and air conditioning. The laundry is on the same floor. The cameras are working.

But, I'm worried. I sleep with my doors unlocked. I put my clothes for the next day by my bed, just in case I need to run out of the apartment if there's another fire. I'm hoping that I'll get over this over time, but I'm constantly worried.

I had to return to the building a few weeks ago, and my whole body reacted. I remembered how the smoke was coming through the walls, so thick and fast. I will always remember that smell. They're trying to cover up the smell, but I'll never forget it.

There were many other health and safety issues at my apartment building that were never fully addressed. There was feces, urine, and garbage sometimes in the stairwells and hallways. There were rodents in some apartments. Even though they brought in an exterminator, it wasn't fixed. So, I had to pay for my own exterminator. The security guards didn't keep us safe. There were no cameras in places where it was needed – like in the stairwells. Management thought that just because we're low income, they can treat us poorly. We had become accustomed to living in bad conditions like that.

There's been so much attention to the building after the fire. Everyone says they want to fix things. But, they should have been doing this all along.

I want Congress to take action to keep our buildings safe. It should not take a tragedy before people get serious about improving the conditions in these buildings. If this happened to us, it can happen to other people too. Congress needs to step up.

Even more importantly, we need to be respected because we matter. Our lives matter. My life matters. I'm just one person, but I want to help change things, so that other people do not go through this.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

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TESTIMONY

BY

VANESSA L. GIBSON

BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT

BEFORE

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING, COMMUNITY

DEVELOPMENT, AND INSURANCE

OF THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20TH 2022

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.

Testimony of New York City Fire Department Acting Commissioner Laura Kavanagh

A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing

House Committee on Financial Services

Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance

April 20, 2022

Good afternoon, Chair Cleaver, Congressmember Torres, and all members of the Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance. My name is Laura Kavanagh, and I am the Acting Commissioner of the New York City Fire Department (“FDNY” or “Fire Department”). I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the fire at the Twin Parks housing development and about how we can ensure that the Fire Department and our partners in government are doing everything we can to keep New Yorkers and all Americans safe.

On Sunday January 9th, just before 11:00 a.m., the Fire Department received a call about a fire in a duplex apartment in the Twin Parks North West building in the Bronx. Approximately three minutes later, the first FDNY units arrived. The fire ultimately resulted in the death of 17 residents and 46 others were hospitalized.

The scale of the tragedy was staggering, even for the veteran firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics who respond to life and death incidents every day. The deaths and injuries that occurred at Twin Parks were the result of heavy smoke that moved rapidly throughout the building, reaching stairwells and hallways. In total, the Fire Department dispatched 200 firefighters and 57 ambulances to the scene. Every available paramedic in the City was sent to help. 15 residents who were discovered in cardiac arrest were rescued and successfully transported to local hospitals. Dozens of others received assistance from firefighters and immediate medical care from EMTs and paramedics. But for the efforts of those first responders, the number of lives lost would have been even greater.

In the aftermath of the Twin Parks fire, Mayor Adams issued Executive Order 12, which requires greater information sharing between the Department of Housing Preservation Development and the Fire Department. This strengthened coordination will improve the way that the Fire Department conducts inspections.

Executive Order 12 also directs the Fire Department and other City agencies to increase public awareness regarding fire safety practices. A key lesson learned from the Twin Parks fire is the importance of educating New Yorkers about closing the door when fleeing a fire. In this incident, the fire itself was contained rather quickly, but the door to the fire apartment and some doors to hallways and stairwells throughout the building remained open, allowing toxic smoke to spread quickly to every floor. Closing the door in the room where a fire is located isolates the fire and

prevents smoke, heat, and flames from spreading to hallways and stairs. The Fire Department has devoted a great deal of attention over the last several years to making sure that New Yorkers understand the importance of closing their doors when escaping a fire. We have worked to educate the public via social media messages, public service announcements, and community outreach. Our message is consistent: closing the door saves lives.

Outreach and education are critical to maintaining public safety. FDNY's Fire Safety Education (FSE) unit has a robust program that reaches all areas of the City, focusing on messaging about closing the door and a variety of other topics. Active and retired firefighters host events with targeted fire safety content and materials to increase awareness of fire and life safety tips as well as disaster preparedness. This includes but is not limited to fire safety presentations, smoke alarm installation campaigns, and mobile CPR trainings. The FSE unit also responds to all major fires, sending teams out into the surrounding neighborhood within 24 hours to connect with the community, distribute fire safety information, and sign people up for smoke alarm installations. From 2015 through 2021, the Fire Department distributed and/or installed 200,000 free smoke alarms.

In 2021 – even with in-person presentations severely limited – the Fire Department conducted 2,170 fire safety presentations, reaching an audience of more than 150,000 New Yorkers. 601 of those presentations were in the Bronx, which amounted to 28% of all presentations citywide. The rate of these events has increased dramatically this year. In the first quarter of 2022, FDNY has performed nearly 1100 presentations, including reaching audiences of 22,000 school children. 900 presentations have been scheduled since the Twin Parks fire. We also post Fire Safety Education materials online. Last year, those pages received more than 26 million hits.

Looking specifically at the Bronx, FDNY ramped up our outreach in this borough in the immediate aftermath of the Twin Parks fire and we have not slowed down. In the weeks following the fire, we engaged with partners at the Department of Education, the New York City Police Department, the American Red Cross, and a wide range of community boards, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations. We are coordinating with the Department of Education to distribute messaging to educators and to share opportunities to schedule presentations in their own classrooms. We are working with several individual building managers in the Bronx to set up virtual fire safety presentations for tenants.

January 9th was the kind of day that stays with first responders for the rest of their careers. Nobody who was involved that day will ever forget the devastation and the loss. Our obligation to those we have lost is to learn from what we have experienced and to recommit ourselves to finding ways to better protect the people of New York City. I thank the Subcommittee and the House of Representatives for your partnership and attention to fire safety issues and for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Testimony of RuthAnne Visnauskas

Commissioner and CEO of the New York State Homes and Community Renewal

“A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing”

House Committee on Financial Services, Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance

April 20, 2022

Thank you, Chairman Cleaver, Congressman Torres, and other members for holding today’s hearing on the need for new legislation to better ensure the safety of public and affordable housing in America.

I am RuthAnne Visnauskas, Commissioner and CEO of New York State Homes and Community Renewal, where our mission is to build, preserve and protect affordable housing throughout New York State. New York State is home to more than 20 million people, living in approximately 7.4 million housing units, of which 3.4 million are renters. All across the state, HCR supports local governments and municipalities in administering Section 8 vouchers, rent stabilization and rent control, and state homeownership assistance programs, and has been charged with delivering Governor Hochul’s ambitious 5-year, \$25 billion housing plan to create and preserve affordable housing.

The tragic Twin Parks complex fire took the lives of seventeen people on Sunday, January 9, and upended the lives of the residents in that building as well as their families and larger communities. I am here today to share both the state’s response to the fire and to discuss what Congress and individual states and localities can do more to protect residents living in affordable housing including those in lower-income, working-class, and immigrant families.

Following the fire, the primary role of the state has been to support residents in securing safe, new housing in a community of their choice. Together with the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, we have actively engaged with tenants, the property owner,

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and the affordable housing community to ensure the building's residents received immediate emergency assistance, as well as options for long-term relocation.

HCR has engaged CVR Associates, which administers project-based Section 8 vouchers on behalf of the agency in the Bronx, to work with all of the residents of Twin Parks who wish to relocate. Current voucher holders may take their voucher if they move and HCR has worked closely with HUD to provide access to new Section 8 vouchers for eligible individuals previously living in the building without a subsidy. Additionally, Governor Hochul has made \$2 million available to impacted tenants for housing relocation services, case management, moving expenses, security deposits for new apartments and reimbursement for families in need of new furniture and other necessities.

The City of New York quickly made available a newly constructed affordable property in the Bronx called La Central. To date, more than 90 families have applied to the new building: 62 families have signed leases; and 54 have already moved in. CVR is continuing to work with each family to identify housing that meets their needs in the neighborhood or community of their choice.

Despite our ability to provide assistance and the crucial contributions of the community and our partners, we must work together to strengthen public and affordable housing protections because the construction and maintenance of subsidized housing is a multi-layered collaboration between federal, state, and local agencies in urban and rural areas.

Within this ecosystem, one of HCR's primary roles is to ensure building owners comply with federal guidelines and requirements. As the affordable housing agency for New York State, we administer several federal programs, including HOME, CDBG, Section 8, as well as 4% and 9% LIHTC programs. We provide fiscal, regulatory and physical oversight of these buildings and are required to conduct ongoing compliance visits, in accordance with federal rules, by inspecting a sample of units in federally subsidized properties to confirm owners meet federal standards. We take our responsibility of making sure building owners comply with these requirements very seriously.

Our constituencies are depending on us all – federal agencies, state agencies, and local agencies – to identify and implement new ways to mitigate safety risks and

to and enhance health and safety requirements for public and affordable housing. As part of this, New York State urges Congress to advance a few key priorities:

- Increase federal funding for safety inspections as well as funding to support new technology-based infrastructure between local, state and federal partners to better ensure compliance monitoring.
- Improve subsidized and affordable housing through the \$150 billion proposed federal investment from the Build Back Better Act to address the massive backlog of public housing capital needs and reduce tenant complaints.
- Increase funding to create new affordable housing options.
- Require space heaters to be produced and sold with automatic shut-off switches.
- Work with industry experts to determine the efficacy and affordability of heat sensors in subsidized multifamily buildings to increase building safety.
- Create a commission with owners, tenants, state agencies, and local code enforcement entities to examine, change or update HUD inspection protocols. Local perspectives are critical as it is the local entities and tenants that are most aware of the unique features, and challenges of the housing stock in their communities.

The need for more federal funding cannot be overstated. Housing in America is at a level of crisis and requires robust funding to begin undoing decades of federal disinvestment in the nation's housing stock. The House of Representatives acknowledged this and successfully passed billions in housing funding through the Build Back Better Act that included meaningful provisions such as:

- \$65 billion to address the backlog of public housing capital needs that would yield a reduction in tenant complaints by improving housing conditions;
- Over \$25 billion in housing choice and rental assistance programs helping to provide hundreds of thousands of housing opportunities for families and reduce overcrowded housing conditions;
- \$25 billion in funding to produce and preserve affordable housing through programs like the National Housing Trust Fund, HOME Investment Partnerships Program, and Community Development Financial Institutions;

- Nearly \$25 billion for climate cognizant housing planning in addition to debt forgiveness for National Flood Insurance Program policyholders;
- \$15 billion in funding to position hundreds of thousands of first-generation homebuyers within reach of homeownership;
- Nearly \$10 billion to support a host of housing planning, development, and revitalization programs that emphasize equitably and efficiency;
- Roughly \$5 billion to ensure that housing related health and safety hazard mitigation is being addressed; and
- Many affordable housing tax credit provisions to support public-private investments that unlock affordable housing construction opportunities not just in New York but nationwide.

We know that we cannot rely on federal funding alone and that is why we emphasize the need for state and local action and collaboration. At the direction of Governor Hochul, the State FY2023 Enacted Budget lays out a comprehensive and thoughtful blueprint for addressing New York's housing and homelessness crisis. It recognizes housing access as critical to the State's economic recovery efforts and commitment to social justice. It addresses longstanding systemic inequities, and it also brings us closer to our goals of achieving a cleaner, greener climate and closing the gap in digital connectivity for lower-income families.

The centerpiece of the budget includes a comprehensive \$25 billion housing plan. This five-year housing plan will create or preserve 100,000 affordable homes across New York, including \$1.5 billion for 10,000 units with support services for vulnerable populations. Other key aspects of the investment include \$1 billion for developing new multi-family affordable housing and \$450 Million for preservation of existing multifamily rental housing; \$400 million to support homeownership opportunities, particularly in historically underserved markets; and \$250 million for a nation leading electrification fund to improve the energy efficiency of 50,000 homes, moving towards the statewide goal of electrifying 1,000,000 homes. The FY 2023 Enacted Budget also addresses several other key housing priorities such as \$350 million in capital improvements for the New York City Housing Authority, \$200 million for all public housing authorities outside of New York City, and \$100 million for the Housing Our Neighbors With Dignity Act to convert vacant commercial properties and distressed hotel properties across the state.

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With additional federal support, we could do even more to preserve and upgrade affordable housing across the state.

Looking ahead, HCR stands ready to work with state, federal and local partners and experts on how to enhance health and safety measures in subsidized housing and to protect against tragedies like this in the future. The proposed bills that create standards for space heaters and require heat sensors in subsidized properties are straightforward proposals that we believe could protect against tragedies like this in the future. We hope that today's hearing can advance the conversation on these proposals and other methods for improving the safety of subsidized housing across the nation.

HCR is poised to work towards sensible measures that will increase the safety of buildings and better protect our residents, friends and neighbors who reside in subsidized and affordable housing units across the state.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and welcome your questions.

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April 25, 2022

The Honorable Emanuel Cleaver
Chair, Subcommittee on Housing,
Community Development, and Insurance
2129 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Letter for the Record for the Hearing Entitled, "A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing"

Dear Chairman Cleaver,

The Door and Hardware Institute (DHI) requests that this letter be included in the record for the Subcommittee's April 20, 2022 hearing, "A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing." As way of background, DHI is an association proudly serving door security and safety professionals, and the dynamic companies they represent, in the non-residential construction industry. Our Certified Fire + Egress Door Assembly Inspector Program (CFDAI) is widely recognized as the premier industry credential for fire door safety inspection professionals. On behalf of more than 5,000 door security and safety professionals represented by DHI across the United States, we thank the Committee for its attention to the important topic of fire safety in federally assisted housing.

We are writing to draw the Committee's attention to the importance of fire door assemblies in fire prevention as it considers legislative solutions to prevent tragedies such as the Twin Parks North West apartment fire from occurring again in the future.

The Importance of Fire Door Assemblies in Fire Protection and Prevention

Life safety through proper fire and smoke containment is a critical issue for building owners and the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ), and doors and hardware are essential elements demanding their utmost attention. Door leaves are one of the few moving elements of a building that people routinely touch and as a result, they are susceptible to wear and tear over time and require ongoing maintenance to keep them working properly. When door leaves are working properly, we might never be consciously aware of them. On the other hand, we become painfully aware of them when they are difficult to open or close and as they become an obstacle we need to overcome in an emergency setting.

In addition to the fire protection properties of door assemblies, swinging door assemblies must provide occupants with access to a clear, unobstructed path of egress through the building, space, or structure to the public way (the street or other safe area outside the building) in panic-inducing situations. Occupants need to be able to evacuate a building, space, or structure safely and quickly at a moment's notice.

Perhaps the most common misconception regarding fire door assemblies is that they will maintain their appearance and be fully functional after being exposed to a fire. During the first few minutes of fire exposure, a metal fire door leaf expands very rapidly on the fire-side of the assembly. This expansion causes the door leaf to deform as it deflects, twists, and warps toward the heat of the fire. When the fire is on the pull-side of the assembly, enormous stress is exerted on the hinges and the latching hardware; but the door leaf must stay closed and latched. As the intensity of the fire increases, the door leaf deflects farther, exerting more stress on the hinges and latching hardware. Latching hardware and hinges are designed to bear an enormous amount of stress during a fire, but they also need to be able to handle additional stresses when the superheated assembly is exposed to the water temperature and pressure from fire hoses as firefighters extinguish the flames.

For these reasons, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) has developed robust door assembly inspection requirements in the **NFPA 80 and NFPA 101 standards**. NFPA 80, *Standard for Fire Doors and Other Opening Protectives*, contains specific requirements for the formal inspection of fire door assemblies to ensure that they are properly maintained throughout the life of their installation and will function properly under fire conditions. Under the provisions of NFPA 80, fire door assemblies are required to be inspected on an annual cycle, and written documentation of these safety inspections is required to be kept on site for review by the AHJ. Another important code that requires safety inspections of swinging door assemblies is NFPA 101, *Life Safety Code™*, which outlines requirements for both fire-rated and non-fire-rated egress door assemblies. **We strongly urge Congress to ensure that the Department of Housing incorporates NFPA 80 and NFPA 101 inspection requirements into its broader inspection criteria to improve life safety in federally assisted housing.**

Congress Should Take a Holistic View When Considering New Fire Mitigation Measures

Committee members and other stakeholders have highlighted legislation that would require or fund fire protection measures such as sprinkler systems, temperature sensors, and self-closing doors. While these measures would undoubtedly help improve life safety, we urge Congress not to limit legislation to a single solution. **Fire protection features are most effective when working as part of a total system, not simply as a stand-alone element.** In a perfect world, fire door assemblies contain fires and provide time for sprinkler systems to extinguish the flames. However, sprinkler systems remain idle, waiting for that moment in time when they are called on to perform their function. Most times the sprinkler systems work well. However, sometimes they fail or are insufficient and cannot contain the flames or prevent the spread of smoke and gases; their success depends heavily on the containment of flames that is provided by fire-resistant construction in ceilings, floors, partitions, walls, and of course, the fire door

assemblies and other opening protectives that are installed within them. Unfortunately, many buildings lack these key protectives, including by failing to meet basic requirements for fire-rated or non-fire rated door assemblies.

As such, we would encourage the Committee to consider expanding legislation to allow more flexibility for building owners to make fire safety improvements that are best suited to improve the safety of their occupants, including by upgrading door assemblies to rated fire door assemblies where appropriate.

Once again, we appreciate the Committee's attention to this matter. DHI is proud to offer itself and its credentialed members as a resource as it considers any future fire safety legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cedric Calhoun', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Cedric Calhoun, FASAE, CAE
Chief Executive Officer
Door and Hardware Institute

Cc:
Members of the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development
and Insurance



BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT VANESSA L. GIBSON

Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson -- Answers to Questions for the Record
Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development, and Insurance
"A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing"
June 2022

1. Shortage of Affordable Housing

Here in The Bronx, we know that Black and Brown communities are at an elevated risk of experiencing a fire in their building and/or neighborhood. For too long, all levels of government have allowed persistent disinvestment in these communities, which has allowed an aging housing stock to fall into ill maintenance and neglect. These conditions have resulted in numerous fires, including the Twin Parks North West fire that claimed the lives of 17 of our neighbors here in The Bronx this past January.

According to the National Fire Prevention Association, citing data from the CDC, Native Americans and Black Americans are more likely than the population as a whole to die from a fire-related cause.¹ This was made plain at Twin Parks, where most of the deceased were Black and immigrants. Additionally, these families were often living in overcrowded apartments, a common experience in low-income and immigrant households. Overcrowding is a potential danger when it comes to fire risk and must be taken into account when crafting fire prevention policies.

When the housing stock is not maintained or operated properly, fires are one of the many potential adverse results. The Twin Parks fire was the result of a malfunctioning space heater that a family was using to heat themselves in their apartment because the landlord was not providing them with sufficient heat. When there is collective disinvestment in our communities, tragedies like this are a foreseeable outcome.

The required inspections under affordable housing programs like Section 8 have the ability to help prevent fatalities such as these. When households who benefit from Section 8 and other programs have inspectors come to follow up on landlord certifications, it ensures that the certifications are accurate. These inspections can prove whether the tenants are receiving the proper services and amenities from the landlords including appropriate levels of heat. Additionally, routine inspections of apartments for violations of city laws such as the fire code as well as inspections following complaints help to deter malfeasance and disinvestment.

Funding through the Fair Housing Initiatives Program (FHIP)² is important for outreach to local communities through fair housing organizations and local governments. When people do not know their rights, it opens them up for abuse. Education and outreach campaigns are essential for informing individuals what their rights are and where they can go for help if they think their rights have been violated.

In New York City and New York State, source of income discrimination is now illegal. This means that households who benefit from programs like Section 8 can no longer legally be turned away from housing just because they use a voucher. This is a strong step towards equity in housing. The federal government should work to make this a national policy, which will allow for stronger enforcement actions.

Enforcement of fair housing policies by all levels of government is essential to ensuring that residents in our communities are able to thrive. I will continue to work to make sure that everyone in our city has the ability to live in safe and affordable housing.

2. Self-Closing Doors

Self-closing doors are one of the major avenues to prevent fire-related deaths. When a fire breaks out in an apartment, the smoke can easily spread throughout the rest of the building if the door to the apartment is open. Evacuating residents should not have to worry about closing the door behind them when they are fleeing.

During the Twin Parks North West fire this past January, a space heater caused a fire in one of the apartments. As the family left their apartment for safety, the door did not close behind them. This was due to a faulty self-closing door. Additionally, broken self-closing doors in the stairwell caused a flue effect that rapidly disseminated the smoke throughout the building, causing many of the deaths and severe injuries. Several complaints regarding faulty or broken self-closing doors in the building had been reported to the city in the past.

In the wake of this fire, the New York City Council introduced several pieces of legislation to combat fires in our city. I introduced two of these bills alongside Councilmember Oswald Feliz regarding self-closing doors which have now been enacted into city law. These bills will tackle the proliferation of broken and faulty self-closing doors across New York City. Increasing inspections and fines for these violations will ensure that landlords take their responsibilities to their tenants seriously and fix these issues without delay.

The onus is on HPD and other city agencies to ensure that they fully carry out the inspections that are mandated to undertake. Landlords are responsible for maintaining the self-closing doors in their buildings, but the city government must push for them to fulfill that mandate and fine them when necessary to ensure that all repairs are made in a timely manner.

New York City is also engaging in more public service notifications regarding self-closing doors. The FDNY has created public service announcements and regularly holds events informing residents about fire safety, including the importance of properly functioning self-closing doors. This includes instructing individuals that it is dangerous to keep these doors propped open.

With regards to federally assisted housing, NYCHA has created a fire safety plan that explicitly mentions that residents should close all doors behind them as they evacuate during a fire emergency.ⁱⁱⁱ HCR also has a fire safety checklist.^{iv}

The importance of the self-closing doors cannot be understated. As an elected leader in New York City, I will work to ensure that the city's agencies are fully complying with their

mandates to conduct inspections and that NYCHA and landlords are properly maintaining the self-closing doors in their buildings.

ⁱ <https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/News-and-Research/Fire-statistics-and-reports/US-Fire-Problem/osstate.pdf>

ⁱⁱ https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/partners/FHIP

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/fire-safety-en.pdf>

^{iv} <https://hcr.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2022/04/2022-b-5-fire-safety-check.pdf>

House Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development, and Insurance
Hearing entitled, “A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing”
Wednesday, April 20, 2022, 12:00 PM
Questions for the Record for Commissioner Laura Kavanaugh and Commissioner Adolfo Carrion Jr.

Self-Closing Doors:

Question: Following a December 2017 fire that claimed the lives of 13 people living in a Bronx high-rise, the New York City Council passed a law requiring self-closing doors in all buildings with three or more apartments. Self-closing doors are doors that return to the closed position when opened and released. How does the City of New York ensure that HUD-assisted residents are informed about the functional purpose of self-closing doors and not inhibiting their function through actions such as propping doors open with objects, taping the latch, using wood wedges or kick-down door stops, or overriding the closing device?

NYC Response: The New York City Housing and Preservation Development’s (HPD) housing information guide, the [ABCs of Housing](#), which is available to all tenants and property owners in the City, includes information about the importance of self-closing doors. HPD’s website also features a [Fire Safety page](#), which includes information about fire safety steps that tenant and owner can take to stay safe, including the role of self-closing doors. HPD’s outreach around self-closing doors also specifically targets property owners and includes periodic reminders through our email bulletins.

The New York City Fire Code (Fire Code) requires that common area doors are self-closing and that *Close the Door* notices are posted on public facing sides of stairwell doors. The Fire Department conducts inspections that include checking for self-closing doors and related notices in common areas. Enforcement is pursued when violations of these sections of the NYC Fire Code are discovered.

As part of the City’s new efforts under the [Mayor’s Executive Order](#) (EO) to improve outreach around the importance of self-closing doors, HPD and the Fire Department are creating new educational materials and revising existing materials under a joint education campaign called “Keep Homes Fire Safe.” The agencies will also utilize existing channels of communication to provide more information about the importance of self-closing doors to tenants and property owners. In addition, the EO emphasizes the importance to HPD and the Fire Department inspectors to check for *Close the Door* notices in the areas under their jurisdiction. HPD and the Fire Department mobile education units will be working together this summer to visit communities throughout the City, to reach tenants and owners directly in their communities.

Temperature Sensors:

Question: In July of 2016, the Housing Opportunity Through Modernization Act (HOTMA) was signed into law. HOTMA made numerous changes to statutes that govern HUD programs, including the establishment of minimum heating requirements for HUD-assisted dwelling units. Residents of public housing have continued to raise concerns about the temperature of units and have at times reported using equipment such as portable space heaters, or leaving ovens open, to stay warm.

- a. How does the City of New York ensure that housing units meet temperature requirements to comply with both federal and local laws?
- b. How many complaints has the City of New York received from tenants within the last year regarding buildings or units that may be non-compliant with temperature requirements? How does the City respond to those complaints and how long does it typically take for a complaint to be resolved?
- c. How many fires in New York City have resulted in fatalities and identified instances of unconventional heating methods such as space heaters as the cause of such incidents?

NYC Response: HPD ensures compliance with local laws around the provision of heat through the City's Citizen Complaint Center (311) system. Property owners registered with the agency (NYC requires annual property registration of contact information with HPD) receive notification via telephone or email (or both) when a complaint is received by HPD. Where contact information is provided, HPD may attempt to contact the tenant prior to inspection to determine if the condition was corrected. If HPD cannot confirm the restoration of heat via phone with the tenant, an inspection will be attempted. FY21 data is below:

	FY21
Total problems reported (311, direct to HPD, Housing Court)	550,284
Heat and hot water original problems	119,912
Heat and hot water duplicate problems	66,274
Avg time (Hours) to first inspection for heat and hot water problems	2.4 hours
Heat violations issued	3,548
Hot water violations issued	6,275

- *A duplicate problem is a second or subsequent problem that is received by the agency before the original problem is closed by a callback to the tenant or an inspection. Duplicate problems are closed with the date and time of the original problem and the result of the original problem.*

Violations are required to be addressed immediately. Restoration time varies widely depending on the cause of the lack of heat. Provision of fuel may remedy a situation quickly while a full boiler replacement may take significant time depending on many factors. HPD may follow up with

litigation in Housing Court for an Order to Correct and civil penalties or may follow up with emergency repairs for the condition.

In 2021, the Bureau of Fire Investigation (BFI) investigated 11 fires that were a result of unconventional heating methods, like space heaters. In 2022, so far, BFI has investigated 16 fires related to space heaters. The Fire Department produces and distributes material that highlights space heater safety. These materials specifically have educational content that promotes safety during the winter/heating season and are discussed as part of every Fire Safety Education presentation. Beyond the educational pamphlets, the Department has created a variety of PSAs and videos that raise awareness of tips regarding use of electric space heaters.

Smoke Detectors:

Question: [Ms. Kavanagh] The National Fire Protection Association reports the death rate per 1,000 home structure fires is 55 percent lower in homes with working smoke alarms than in homes with no alarms or alarms that fail to operate. Can you explain how the City of New York ensures detectors are both present and in working condition?

NYC Response: HPD will receive a complaint about a missing/defective smoke detector if a tenant contacts 311 about this condition and a violation may be issued. HPD proactively checks for the presence of working smoke detectors during every apartment inspection that is conducted and issues violations as warranted. HPD also highlights information about smoke detectors in the *ABCs of Housing* and on HPD's website.

The Fire Department performs regular inspections of residential and commercial buildings throughout the City, which includes checking for working smoke detectors in common areas per the Fire Code. Enforcement procedures are pursued when buildings are found to be in violation of this code requirement.

The Fire Department has a robust Community Affairs Unit (CAU) that works to promote fire prevention and life safety. Within CAU, there is the Fire Safety Education Unit (FSE) which works with community and faith-based organizations, schools, intergovernmental partners, and local/elected stakeholders to enhance fire safety programming citywide. Programs include classroom and community-based presentation both in-person and virtually which highlight the importance of maintaining working smoke detectors in residences. In 2021, over 2,000 fire safety education events were held reaching over 150,000 New York City residents, over half being youth grades K-12.

In addition, CAU adjusted all unit operations to utilize both, in person and virtual, platforms to provide free smoke alarm installations to residents in partnership with the American Red Cross. On average, our alarm installation team installs approximately 1,700-2,000 alarms in about 500-600 homes monthly. Alarm installations are scheduled by individual requests, which go through

the American Red Cross, or through building outreach in which FSE works with property managers to install/educate throughout buildings in high impact communities.

