

**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, Congressman 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 9<sup>th</sup>, 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.