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# AN OVERVIEW OF NEW YORK PUBLIC HOUSING

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## **I. Introduction**

Across the country, government housing policies are forcing low-income people out of their cities. Public Housing, one of the last affordable housing options for low-income people in this country, is being systematically defunded, privatized, and destroyed and replaced by mixed-income housing. As a result of this approach, hundreds of thousands of units of low-income public housing have been lost, displacing families, destroying community ties and causing families to become homeless. Although demolition has yet to happen in New York City, the systematic defunding of the city's public housing has drastically affected the lives of the thousands of residents and could likely lead to privatization and demolition in the near future.

Right to the City, a national alliance of grassroots organizations from 7 regions across the country, was formed to combat gentrification and the displacement of low-income communities of color from urban areas. The alliance views the struggle against the demolition, privatization and disinvestment of public housing as a central component in this fight.

### ***The Housing Crisis in New York City***

Over the past couple of decades, New York City has witnessed a steady decline of affordable housing units, making it increasingly difficult for low-income New Yorkers to continue to live and work in the city. Since 1990, the City has lost 29,831 units of state-subsidized Mitchell-Lama housing,<sup>1</sup> and 6,077 project-based apartments in the federal Section 8 program.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, rent regulated apartments are disappearing in the City at an increasing rate due to changes to the rent laws.

The crisis has not been contained to rental apartments. In July 2009, the number of homes in New York City in foreclosure was 2,517, a jump of almost 15% from the previous month. The disappearance of affordable housing options for low-income people, coupled with a rising unemployment rate hovering just below 10%,<sup>3</sup> threatens to displace low-income residents from neighborhoods in which they have lived for generations.

The New York City Housing Authority, which runs the city's extensive public housing program, has seen a continual disinvestment from all levels of government. This disinvestment has led the city's public housing stock to fall into a \$137 million deficit, which has resulted in rising rents and cuts in services for residents. Despite

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<sup>1</sup> The Mitchell-Lama program was created by New York State in 1955 to provide affordable housing to moderate income families.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Waters, "As City Grows, Affordable Housing Shrinks," April 21, 2008, Gotham Gazette, <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/sustainabilitywatch/20080421/210/2501>

<sup>3</sup> Thompson's Statement on NYC Dept. of Labor Announcement of July Unemployment Rate, [www.comptroller.nyc.gov](http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov). August 20, 2009

NYCHA’s massive deficit, public housing remains one of the only stable and affordable options for low-income people in New York City.

***New York City’s Response***

The city government’s response to increased demand for more low-income housing has fallen far short of meeting actual need. Mayor Bloomberg’s *New Housing Marketplace Plan*, launched in 2004, aims to create and preserve 168,000 units of affordable housing by the end of 2012. However, due to the current economic recession, this plan has been delayed.<sup>4</sup> A report released by the Independent Budget Office in 2007, likewise, raised doubts about the Plan’s ability to build new units of affordable housing by 2013, leaving those depending on this housing hanging in the balance.<sup>5</sup> Notably absent from Mayor Bloomberg’s housing policy is a strategy for maintaining and improving public housing in New York City. His plan instead focuses on affordable housing options that rely heavily on the private market and for-profit developers, a strategy that has not proven to provide adequate housing for those most in need.

***New York City Housing Authority- A Snapshot***

The New York City Housing Authority, currently in its 75<sup>th</sup> year of existence, runs the largest public housing program in North America. It is also the city agency responsible for administering the Section 8 Housing Program. First Houses, located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, was the first housing development built by the agency. Since then, NYCHA has grown to oversee 178,489 apartments in 338 developments in all 5 boroughs in New York City. As of January 2009, these developments were home to over 400,000 authorized<sup>6</sup> residents. As noted on NYCHA’s webpage, if the agency were its own city, it would be the 19<sup>th</sup>

<b>Public Housing in NYC: A Timeline</b>	
<b>1934</b>	NYCHA is created
	First Houses built in the Lower East Side
<b>1937</b>	Fed. Housing Program Established
<b>1939</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> City and State development constructed
<b>1968</b>	Tenant patrol created
<b>1970</b>	Brooke-Sparkman amendment provides that residents need not pay more than 25% of their income on rent.
<b>1974</b>	Section 8 Program created through the Housing and Community Development Act
<b>1998</b>	Mandatory community service is introduced
<b>1998</b>	New York State eliminates yearly operating funds to NYCHA
<b>2001</b>	New York City eliminates yearly operating funds to NYCHA
<b>2006</b>	Community groups and advocates win \$120 million from the city for NYCHA
<b>2007</b>	Community groups and advocates win \$3.5 million from New York State for NYCHA

<sup>4</sup> Manny Fernandez, *New York Housing Plan is Delayed*, New York Times, January 5, 2009.

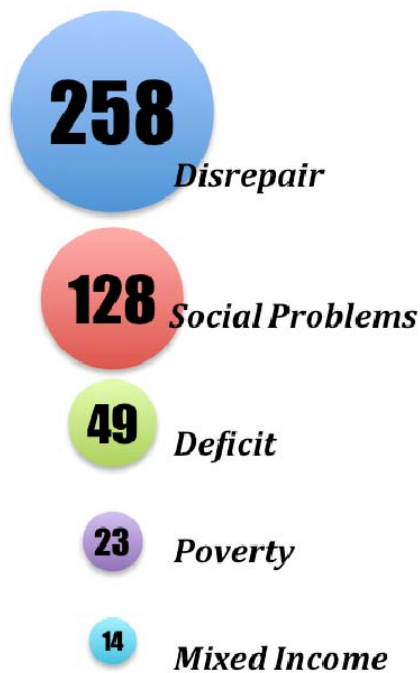
<sup>5</sup> New York City Independent Budget Office, *The Mayor’s New Housing Marketplace Plan: Progress to Date and Prospects for Completion*, November 2007.

<sup>6</sup> NYCHA considers residents “authorized” if their name legally appears on the lease.

most populous city in the country, competing in size with major U.S. cities like Miami and Oakland. About 1 in every 20 residents lives in public housing in New York City, making NYCHA largest landlord in the city.

## II. Perceptions of Public Housing Residents

The media's coverage of public housing in New York City is almost exclusively negative, helping paint an image of public housing as a broken down and dangerous place to live. This focus has helped bolster the trend towards disinvestment in the public housing locally.



The following section provides a review of 50 different news articles that reported on public housing in New York City. The articles were published in major news sources in the U.S. over the last three years, were randomly selected using *Westlaw* media search, and were analyzed using N6, a qualitative data analysis program.

*The chart to the left depicts the number of times each of these themes was mentioned throughout this review.*

### **Primary Themes & Solutions Presented**

#### Disrepair of Public Housing

The most prevalent theme in the articles reviewed about public housing in New York City is the disrepair of the housing developments; specifically, the disrepair of the authority's 3,338 elevators.<sup>7</sup> In the 50 articles reviewed, the word

"elevator" was mentioned 234 times. The prevalence of this topic is due in part to the tragic death of a 5-year-old boy, who was killed in August of 2008 attempting to escape from a stalled elevator in a public housing development in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.<sup>8</sup> While this incident was widely reported on in the media, rarely did these articles connect government disinvestment as a primary cause of the breakdown of elevators and other disrepair.

#### Societal Ills

A secondary theme that frequently appears in news articles is the prevalence of social problems in New York City's public housing, such as drugs, violence and

<sup>7</sup> New York City Housing Authority Factsheet, available at: [www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/factsheet.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/factsheet.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> Brooklyn Boy, 5, Falls 10 Stories to His Death After Public Housing Elevator Stalls, NYTimes, August 20, 2008. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/20/nyregion/20fall.html>

crime. In fact few stories exclude one of these themes, even if it is not the primary focus of the article.

#### NYCHA's Deficit

NYCHA's ongoing deficit is another theme that appears throughout the media's treatment of public housing in New York City. As government has continued to invest fewer resources in public housing, NYCHA has been unable to conduct necessary capital improvements on its buildings, instead leaving public housing residents with unsanitary conditions, faulty household appliances, and an environment friendly to crime and drugs. However, articles that mention the agency's debt rarely cite the disinvestment in public housing as the primary cause of the two most prevalent themes found in the media- the disrepair of public housing stock and societal ills such as drugs, violence and crime.

#### ***What's Missing***

##### Improving the Current Public Housing Program

Given the media's negative coverage of New York City's public housing, there is rarely any mention of ways to improve current public housing stock and its programs. Coverage of public housing depicts a system in crisis, focusing on the disrepair of the buildings and the prevalence of social ills. The articles reviewed rarely provide further analysis of how or why these problems are more concentrated in public housing than elsewhere. Nor is any connection made to the root causes of these problems, such as the disinvestment in public housing, rising unemployment in the city, and the failure to provide supportive services to NYCHA's residents.

##### Lack of Community Perspective

Public housing residents in New York City—those being most directly impacted by the trend of disinvestment in public housing—lack a clear voice in the media surrounding their homes. Coverage instead seeks out the opinions of policy makers and experts. Consequently, the media does not include reports on public housing residents and the impact disinvestment is having on their homes and communities.

##### Sense of Community Among Public Housing Residents

Almost completely missing in the articles reviewed was any mention of the system's positive attributes. The media rarely conveys a sense in its reporting that public housing is a good, stable and affordable place to live and raise a family in New York City. Similarly, the media's negative treatment of public housing in New York entirely omits any sense of community that exists among NYCHA residents. The exclusion of positive attributes of NYCHA helps bolster the trend towards disinvestment in public housing.

### **III. Public Housing Policy in New York City**

#### Disinvestment in Public Housing

The national trend towards disinvestment in public housing in favor of market-based housing programs has affected NYCHA severely. In 2001, the total amount of

federal capital funds committed to public housing was over \$4 billion. By 2008, that amount shrunk to \$2.5 billion.<sup>9</sup> This shrinking of federal dollars, combined with funding shortfalls from New York State and City, has helped produce NYCHA's operating deficit of \$137 million.

In recent years, due to the successful organizing efforts of community-based groups and advocates, many also Right to the City alliance members, NYCHA has received several allocations of money from all levels of government to help prevent worsening conditions in NYCHA's developments. On the city level, groups secured \$120 million from the New York City Council for NYCHA in 2006, and another \$18 million in 2008.<sup>10</sup> In 2007, community groups successfully obtained \$3.5 million from New York State, marking the first time in 12 years that the state had provided funding to public housing. This year, the Federal government passed the American Recovery and Investment Act, which provided \$423 million to NYCHA for capital improvements.<sup>11</sup> While these successes are notable, without a firm commitment from all levels of government to fully fund public housing in New York City, these one-time contributions of funding will not be enough to keep the agency out of financial crisis.

The continued disinvestment in NYCHA is having a real impact on public housing residents. Without adequate funding, NYCHA has continually raised rents and cut down on employees and services to its residents. In 2008, due to federal funding shortages, NYCHA was forced to close dozens of community centers meant to provide services for NYCHA's residents.<sup>12</sup>

### Demolition and Disposition

Public housing policy in New York City is unique in that it has resisted the national trend towards demolition. While major U.S. cities such as Atlanta, Chicago and New Orleans have been tearing down their public housing stock in favor of mixed-income developments, most of New York City's developments, thanks in part to active organizing efforts by public housing residents and community groups, have been left standing.

However, New York City has not escaped the trend completely. Between 2005 and 2009, NYCHA lost a total of 3,880 apartments either through demolition or disposition. NYCHA is currently considering selling off much more of its unused property to private developers, including the air rights, or the space above its property.<sup>13</sup> In the instances in which NYCHA has undergone land disposition to construct new residential units, the resulting housing is not guaranteed to be truly affordable for the people in the community. Given NYCHA's looming deficit,

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<sup>9</sup>Barbara Sard & Will Fischer, *Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, Preserving Safe, High Quality Public Housing Should be a Priority of Federal Housing Policy* (Sept. 18, 2008)

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Benjamin, *\$59.1 B Budget- For Now*, The Daily News, June 2008

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/factsheet.shtml>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Rivoli, *For Cash-Strapped NYCHA, Solution is Close to Home*, September 12, 2009=8

furthermore, some policy experts and community groups question whether selling its property represents the best way to help close the agency's deficit.<sup>14</sup>

#### **IV. Community-Based Solutions**

Within the New York City chapter of the Right to the City Alliance (RTTC NYC), many groups currently organize public housing residents and are engaged in active campaigns to maintain and improve the public housing system. Some of these groups include: Community Voices Heard, Families United for Racial and Economic Justice, Mothers on the Move, and Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side. The following are some of the grassroots policy solutions the RTTC NYC organizations are recommending in their ongoing campaign work:

##### *Fully Fund NYCHA at all Levels of Government*

Given the government's continual disinvestment in public housing, the campaigns being waged by community groups in New York City are primarily aimed at pushing all levels of government—local, state and national—to fully fund NYCHA developments. These groups view the disinvestment in NYCHA as the root cause of other pressing problems, such as the disrepair of buildings, rising rents and social problems such as crime, drugs and violence.

##### *Stop Payment by NYCHA to the New York Police Department and Sanitation Department*

NYCHA currently pays over \$70 million each year to the New York City Police and Sanitation Departments, a fee that is meant to provide public housing residents with additional "special services" not given to those in private housing. Many public housing residents claim that they do not see any evidence of these additional services.<sup>15</sup> RTTC NYC groups are demanding that the city stop requiring NYCHA to pay additional fees to these agencies as a way to help lessen the debt.

##### *Create Channels for Meaningful Resident Participation*

RTTC NYC groups that organize public housing residents are pushing NYCHA to include meaningful channels for residents to participate in decisions that are made about their homes. NYCHA currently encourages residents to become involved in existing resident bodies as a means to engage in decision-making around public housing. However, according to an upcoming report by Community Voices Heard (CVH), a member group of RTTC NYC, resident bodies do not have enough power to significantly affect NYCHA's decision-making process. In order to increase residents' decision-making ability, CVH suggests that the federal government allow these bodies to hold veto power over NYCHA policy in certain areas.

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Goldiner, *Testimony by the Legal Aide Society on the NYCHA Annual and 5 Year Plan*, June 23, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

### Stop the Disposition of NYCHA Property

RTTC NYC groups are pushing NYCHA to consider alternatives to selling its property in order to help rid the agency of its deficit. Many groups and advocates that work with and organize public housing residents are fearful that the sale of unused public housing property would put NYCHA on a trajectory similar to that of Chicago, New Orleans, and other cities that have torn down and privatized much of their housing.<sup>16</sup> These groups are pushing NYCHA to consider other ways to use this property to produce additional revenue for the agency, such as leasing some of the unused land.

### Stimulus Tracking and Oversight

The American Recovery and Investment Act, commonly referred to as the “stimulus package,” provided over \$4 billion to New York City, including \$423 million for capital improvements in NYCHA. Many of the RTTC NYC groups are engaged in efforts to ensure this money is spent and monitored through a transparent process with adequate community involvement and oversight.

### Build More Public Housing by Converting Vacant Condos

In New York City, thousands of condominiums are currently empty or in a state of foreclosure due to the current economic crisis. This housing sits unoccupied even as homelessness and the number of families living in shelters in the City are on the rise. RTTC NYC groups have recently launched a campaign to push the City to convert these empty condominiums into permanently affordable public housing for low-income people.

## **V. Conclusion**

Public housing in New York City remains one of the only reliable and affordable housing options for low-income people. Despite the important role NYCHA plays in providing stable housing to thousands of low-income families, government at all levels has continually disinvested in the agency. NYCHA’s financial strain has resulted in the disrepair of public housing buildings, decreased supportive services for residents, and rising rents.

Although New York City is unique in resisting the national trend towards demolition of its public housing, residents have been heavily affected by the lack of financial and political support for NYCHA. In lieu of funding the agency at levels necessary to successfully operate the City’s vast housing stock, public officials continue to direct resources towards the creation of market-based housing programs. Many of these programs, such as those prioritized by Mayor Bloomberg’s *New Housing Marketplace Plan*, do not create housing that is truly affordable to low-income people. Yet as affordable housing options available through the private market continue to shrink in the city, and homelessness, foreclosure and unemployment rates continue to rise, the preservation and vitality of the nation’s largest public housing system is all the more necessary.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.