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Manhattan DA Cyrus Vance (r.) and Housing Authority chief John Rhea announce 19 gang arrests at city housing project.

Double-talk on security cams

BY JANON FISHER and GREG B. SMITH
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

THE CITY'S housing boss praised the use of cameras in the takedown of Harlem drug dealers — a day after backing off a promise to install cameras in 80 crime-ridden projects.

New York City Housing Authority Chairman John Rhea stood with cops and prosecutors on Thursday, crediting good police work and the use of surveillance cameras with the arrest of 19 members of two gangs.

The dealers were caught on camera slinging crack, cocaine and marijuana on playgrounds, in front of a community center and in the lobbies of the Wagner Houses over the last three years. The suspected ring-leader, Johnice Erby, 27, prepared crack in an apartment at NYCHA's Wagner Houses, prosecutors said.

A similar investigation would have been difficult at most housing projects given that only 15 of the city's 334 have VIPER cameras monitored by the NYPD around the clock.

"We don't have the capital dollars to install them and the NYPD doesn't have the budget, and neither does NYCHA, to have surveillance cameras throughout 2,600 buildings," Rhea said.

A Daily News investigation showed NYCHA had been sitting on \$42 million for cameras for years. Two weeks ago, Rhea promised to install cameras at 80 developments.

NYCHA even upped the ante on its website, saying "approximately 85 developments will receive security camera installations by the end of 2013."

But in an interview Wednesday, when Rhea was asked if NYCHA was going to put camer-

as in all these developments, he responded, "No. That's not how we phrased it. That's the way you . . . no, we didn't. We said, 'security enhancements,' and this is the problem . . . with the way you wrote the story."

Rhea couldn't describe the "security enhancements" but promised to get back to The News. As of Thursday, he had yet to do so.

During the interview he said he'd "hit the pause button" on installing cameras because he wanted to add more security such as "layered access" — a more sophisticated door-lock system to complement cameras.

But Rhea also made it clear the \$42 million allotted by the City Council for cameras in the

specific developments would not be nearly enough for the new, improved system he envisions.

"We don't have enough money to do all 80 developments (so they) are going to be fully outfitted with layered access. There's not enough money for that. Every building's not going to have new doors and new intercoms. Every building's not going to have a full complement of cameras. I wish we had that. We don't have that."

A lack of cameras has hampered solving several recent crimes at city housing projects, including the July 5 shooting of Officer Brian Groves.

There were also no cameras in the Pelham Parkway Houses apartment where 88-year-old Evelyn Shapiro was found dead on June 16. And there were no cameras at the Baruch Houses where Jonali Morales, 42, was found dead inside an elevator.

Those three buildings are scheduled to get cameras by next year.

gsmith@nydailynews.com

BY LARRY McSHANE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

CITY HOUSING officials, in addition to sitting on nearly \$1 billion in federal funds, were too inept to collect an additional \$600 million in available revenue, a civic improvement group charged last year.

In a letter to Mayor Bloomberg — who staunchly defends his handpicked chairman of the New York City Housing Authority — the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation complained the agency's management was beset by "delay, confusion and complaints."

The Sept. 26, 2011, missive obtained by the Daily News blamed NYCHA for blowing a shot at collecting millions in much-needed additional cash by its failure to simply apply for a second helping of money.

"NYCHA seems to lack the capacity to put credible applications together for these desperately needed funds," the pointed letter said.

"And the sources of the revenue have limited confidence in NYCHA's capacity to spend these funds wisely."

The agency did collect \$270 million in 2005 by applying for a second round of funding through the city Housing Development Corp. — and could have done so again, the group said.

The Metro Industrial Areas Foundation is a nonprofit organization comprised of 204 affiliates — mostly local congregations and nonprofit groups. The group also suggested applying to the feds for additional funds under its energy efficiency program for public housing.

The letter blasted NYCHA for its tortoise-paced response to tenant complaints for repair work across the five boroughs.

"NYCHA claims that at least it is honest now — giving people likely dates, however long in the future," the group wrote. "We say this is not even close to good enough."

The group acknowledged there were "periods of modest improvement" in the sprawling agency during Bloomberg's three terms in office.

"But the overall pattern is one of delay, confusion and complaints about lack of adequate funding," the two-page letter read.

"As a result, tenants often wait years for basic repairs to conditions that threaten their health and safety."

Thousands of very young and the very old residents of the NYCHA's 334 projects are subjected to serious health concerns by inattention to mold and miserable ventilation systems, the letter said.

"The prevalence of asthma among the children of NYCHA families has been well-documented," the letter said.

The group blasted almost every aspect of NYCHA's handling of complaints from its 400,000 residents.

"We have struggled to push NYCHA to improve its basic functions — responding to maintenance requests from tenants, coordinating the way repairs are scheduled and sequenced . . . making sure that the local workforce is well-managed and focused," the letter said.

The mayor's office never responded to the letter, although the Bronx borough office of the NYCHA replied that plans were in the works to get the repairs done.

"There was nothing from City Hall," said Marilyns Divanne.

Months before penning the letter, members of the group met with NYCHA Chairman John Rhea

DAILY NEWS INVESTIGATES

and then-Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott to discuss their concerns about the lack of repair work in the buildings.

Neither Walcott nor the mayor's office responded to requests for comment on the IAF letter or earlier meetings with the group to discuss NYCHA.

Divanne, one of four people who signed the letter to Bloomberg, said her group felt they didn't get a fair shake.

"They heard what we had to say, but they were defensive," she recounted about a November 2010 meeting with Walcott and Rhea.

"They felt that they had a plan to preserve NYCHA, and they were confident in that plan, and they weren't open to some of our ideas."

In a briefing memo before a Jan. 18, 2011, meeting with NYCHA execs, the Metro IAF team was reminded of its key complaints:

— The agency "has made NO progress that we can see or document in the daily maintenance and response to the vast majority of tenants."

— The agency was "leaving hundreds of millions of dollars on the table."

Divanne said her group was particularly focused on handling small repairs before they evolved into major problems.

"What they're doing now is deferred maintenance, and we're going to end up paying twice or triple the money NYCHA needs now," she said. "It's just going to continue to get worse until things are changed."

The Daily News, in a series of articles, reported that NYCHA was sitting on close to \$1 billion in federal funds intended for building upkeep.

The housing authority — where the top salaries run close to \$200,000 a year — also delayed spending \$42 million in funds for security cameras in high-crime city buildings.

A suspect in the July 5 shooting of Officer Brian Groves, 30, remains on the loose after a shootout in a stairwell with no cameras.

Mayor Bloomberg, despite the unused funds and criticism from tenants, praised the efforts of Rhea.

Rhea and his two top executives are all Bloomberg appointees.

And Rhea, in a lengthy interview with The News, said he earned his \$197,000 salary — as did two colleagues paid \$187,000 annually.

Metro IAF's critiques surfaced on the same day that the News reported on a scathing NYCHA

audit conducted by Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer.

In a stinging report, the agency was ripped for its high salaries and the costs of hidden perks — including city cars and drivers for top executives.

The Stringer critique urged changes to start at the top of the agency, noting that NYCHA is the only public housing authority in the state with full-time, highly paid board members.

Elsewhere in the state, the salary for authority board jobs is capped at \$2,500.

"The administration won't face the reality that NYCHA is not equipped to handle the issues facing public housing in the city," said Divanne.

"We want to make sure people go home and feel safe, and live in healthy environments. Instead, people wait for years and their health deteriorates."

lmcshane@nydailynews.com



How The News has uncovered the shame of NYCHA's many failures.



DAILY NEWS

The mayor's obstinate stance brings to mind the adage that there are none so blind as those who will not see.

SEE EDITORIAL, PAGE 26

September 26, 2011

Dear Mayor Bloomberg:

As you know, we have worked closely and productively with your administration on a wide range of issues in the South Bronx, the creation of the Mott Haven, the construction of 1,525 more affordable Nehemiah homes in Spring Creek, just to name a few.

Our experience with many of your agencies and your commissioners has shown us that the city is capable of great creativity and productivity in the areas of...

That is why our experience with the New York City Housing Authority is even more troubling. There have been occasional periods of modest improvement, but the overall pattern is one of delay, confusion, and complaints about the lack of adequate funding. As a result, tenants often wait years for basic repairs to conditions that threaten their health and safety.

In the process of our work on these matters, we have done what any responsible organization that we have found both...

We believe that NYCHA has not made use of at least \$600 million of available revenue that could be used to address many of the most dangerous conditions that we have described. NYCHA could apply for a second round of funding, through HDC, just as it did in 2005, when it secured \$270 million in revenue for roof and brickwork. NYCHA could also apply to HUD for funding under HUD's energy efficiency program for public housing.

NYCHA seems to lack the capacity to put credible applications together for these desperately needed funds. And the sources of this revenue have limited confidence in NYCHA's capacity to spend these funds wisely.

- number of new projects in the school arena; and
- A widely respected professional be recruited to lead this subsidiary, someone with extensive construction and management experience. That person would be able to consider whether several rehabilitation and management organizations in the city could be engaged in

this work.

Many years of effort on our part have yielded very little change in NYCHA. We hope your administration intervene in a meaningful way.

of defeated attitude that many parents... tracts of vacant land, 100,000 deserted apartments, a murder total climbing toward 2,200 per year... other seemingly intractable challenges. All of those challenges have been met with great energy and creativity and persistence. The challenge of improving NYCHA can be met as well, so that the children who have so many new educational options don't go home every night to apartments that threaten their health and well-being.

Sincerely,
Reverend Getulio Cruz Father Frank Skelly Mr. Ray Lopez Ms. Marielys Divaone

Mike, why didn't you act on a civic group's complaints about NYCHA last year? Now, News finds exact same problems.

DEAR MIKE

- Letter last year warned of NYCHA's failures
- City leaders turned blind eye to complaints
- Wasted funds, delayed repairs & health risks

DAILY NEWS EDITORIAL

Mike's blind spot

The mayor should have read the letter. The mayor should have taken the contents seriously. The mayor should have responded appropriately and aggressively for the betterment of New York.

The subject was the New York City Housing Authority, whose failures of leadership and execution have been front and center in the Daily News.

Dated Sept. 26, 2011, the letter presented Mayor Bloomberg with a detailed bill of particulars against NYCHA that is identical to the Daily News' accounts of an agency riddled by incompetence and sloth.

Bloomberg has dismissed this newspaper's reporting as cause for remedial action, even describing NYCHA Chairman John Rhea's performance as "spectacular." Yet the letter documents that the administration, if not the mayor, had full warning that the agency had run off the rails to the detriment of thousands of low-income New Yorkers.

The mayor's obstinate stance brings to mind the truth that there are none so blind as those who will not see.

Four leaders of major community organizations, part of the South Bronx Churches and Manhattan Together, signed the letter to the mayor:

They are the Rev. Getulio Cruz, pastor of Monte Sion Christian Church on the lower East Side; the Rev. Frank Skelly, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in the South Bronx; Ray Lopez, of Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Services, and Marielys Divanne, chief organizer for South Bronx Churches and Manhattan Together.

These are not lightweights. The groups they lead represent 52 congregations, schools and social service providers. All have had extensive, first-hand experience with NYCHA because thousands of their members live in public housing.

Politely, they told Bloomberg that tenants wait years for "basic repairs to conditions that threaten their health and safety;" that NYCHA "has not made use of at least \$600 million of available revenue that could be used to address many of the most dangerous conditions that we have described," and that "NYCHA seems to lack the capacity to put credible applications together for these desperately needed funds."

All true. All precisely consistent with The News' findings. All ignored.

The mayor did not respond personally. The letter was bounced from City Hall to NYCHA and then bounced down even further to the agency's lowly Bronx borough office, which replied with boilerplate promises of better repair services.

How that happened, and whether Bloomberg saw the letter, is unclear. Still, the brushoff encapsulates his determined insistence to treat NYCHA as an orphaned stepchild while holding Rhea out as the second coming of Robert Moses.

The dismissiveness is all the more galling because the mayor and his aides were well acquainted with these particular community organizations, as well as with a parent operation, called Metro IAF, that unites them with similar groups in Brooklyn and Queens.

Worse, top Metro IAF leader Michael Gecan had earlier met with then-Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott, spelled out NYCHA's ineptitude and urged the creation of a special construction agency to be led by a top-flight professional.

Gecan got nowhere, and NYCHA went on under Rhea as an agency that could not get its act together to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid targeted for repairs and renovations.

And that failed to spend \$42 million earmarked for installation of security cameras for as long as eight years.

And that is limping along with top positions long unfilled, as Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer revealed in a spot-on report.

And that has proven incapable – even now, under close scrutiny – of keeping commitments.

Case in point, and one that Bloomberg should note as, willfully blind, he stands by Rhea:

On the day The News revealed the camera boondoggle, Rhea unveiled a plan to get them running in 80 projects. The agency website states: "Approximately 85 developments will receive security camera installations by the end of 2013."

But on Wednesday, Rhea said he had promised only "security enhancements," not cameras, and could not say how many developments would, in fact, get electronic surveillance.

Spectacular? No. Intolerable? Yes. Open your eyes, mayor.