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Reconstructing the Affordable Housing Plan

Abstract

It is evident that American society is divided into different economic classes. With this the lower/working class face many challenges when it comes to accessing basic needs. One of which involves having affordable housing. In 1934, the New York Housing Authority was created to help resolve this dilemma. Under this new plan came promises for decent housing, targeted for low-income individuals. With the current rise of COVID-19 new demands are placed on tenants and landlords to help keep this plan running. This further leads to the questions: To what extent was the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) corporation successful in ensuring housing safety for tenants during the start of the pandemic? If the NYCHA has not been effective, what can city officials do to solve this issue? A mixed methods approach will be used to help explore these questions. Qualitative research will derive from news articles, while quantitative reports will derive from research journals and NYCHA fact sheets. Data from these sources will then be analyzed to examine the progress made by NYCHA to help the wellbeing of tenants. What was discovered is that while the NYCHA housed thousands of families, COVID-19 remains a persistent issue among tenants due to poor infrastructure and NYCHA neglect.

Introduction

Imagine yourself as a kid growing up in your childhood neighborhood. You have started many friendships, enjoy your school life and even dreamed of becoming a politician. However, you dread coming home to your apartment. The smell and sight of the building creeps you out as much as the story of the Babadook. Although you understand why your parents moved here, you wish there was something you can do to help make your house feel more like home. Affordable housing has been a topic amongst many government officials for decades. In New York City, mayors have tried to fix the issue by increasing funding. Yet for many New Yorkers, the number of people without homes is always increasing. This further leads to the question: To what extent was the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) corporation successful in ensuring safety for tenants during COVID-19? While efforts have been made to ensure low-income families have a home, little improvements have been made to ensure good housing quality for NYCHA residents.

Methodology Report

The New York City Housing Authority is a large organization that houses many people across the 5 boroughs: Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, Bronx and Staten Island. According to the 2021 NYCHA Fact Sheet, one out of fifteen New Yorkers are housed under the NYCHA. While the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) houses many people it still failed to accommodate financial concerns. Mihir Zaveri (2022) in his *New York Times* article reported the anxiety many NYCHA residents felt about their ability to afford rent. This then leads to what kind of income these residents are getting. According to the 2021 NYCHA fact sheet, “the average family housing income is \$24,503”. Comparing this with the average public housing

family monthly rent (five-hundred thirty six dollars), roughly \$1,505 is left over for families to use towards other necessities. Yet, people like Eileen Dominick, one of the people Zaveri interviewed, owes about \$3,000 in missed payments from 2020. There has always been an issue with tenants paying their rents prior to the height of the pandemic. Although the rent is low for public housing apartments, people are still struggling to pay. As the bills stack, more pressure has been put on families to figure out how to spend their paychecks. Although there was a stall placed on the eviction cases, it is unclear whether NYCHA will go through with it in the future (Zaveri, 2022). While the NYCHA landlords uphold the idea of producing “low-cost housing” many tenants still struggle to pay it off.

Fire safety is another issue concerning public housing. On January 9, 2022 there was a massive fire in the Bronx. The fire killed at least seventeen and injured approximately sixty people (The Associated Press, 2022). Stepping away from the death count, it is important to notice the anatomy of the building. This building was nineteen stories high (The Associated Press, 2022). Firefighters determined that this fire was caused by a space heater that malfunctioned that morning. After many hours there was a guide put out to help residents know how to handle a space heater. However, a deeper question remained amongst locals: Why are renters paying for space heaters when heat is already guaranteed by the landlord? This situation angered many locals. As a result multiple residents sued the landlord with the help of lawyer Benjamin Crump (The Associated Press, 2022). This housing project was home to many families. Tenants leaving their door open was one of the main criticisms of the FDNY. However, there has not been any evidence of an outside fire escape that could have helped many of the families exit the building safely. This also speaks to the disregard for building safety standards.

NYCHA also creates overcrowding by failing to maintain elevators. As recommended by the Center for Diseases and Control (CDC, 2019), people are advised to stay six feet away from each other. In a place like a housing project, following this guideline is nearly impossible. As reported by Michael Kamber, a journalist, residents in a Bronx complex have to fit themselves in one elevator as the other one was out of service (The New Yorker, 2020, 2:57). Residents also have to stand foot-to-foot and shoulder-to-shoulder while riding the elevator. This becomes a problem when people are leaving their apartments to go to school and/or work. In addition, an interviewee reported that they have not seen much maintenance work within the elevators (The New Yorker, 2020, 2:38) Given that these buildings are usually multiple stories high, if many people are leaving around similar times, more space will be occupied, making it easier for COVID-19 to spread person to person.

Results

There has been no significant improvement in housing quality for NYCHA residents since the start of the pandemic. Housing neglect and poor financial support make living with the COVID-19 virus more tedious for tenants. Irregular check-ins for elevators and doors shows how the NYCHA was not created to serve its tenants. There is also a lack of communication between tenants and the NYCHA. Not only is this information withheld from its residents, but also from the public. During the course of this research there has been no updates on COVID-19 cases from residents in NYCHA since 2020. Furthermore, no annual reports on housing quality have been accessible to the public. While the NYCHA argues that they are working on engaging residents with health resources (CEP Overview, n.d), tenants, such as the ones interviewed by Kamber, report that they rarely see maintenance work done (The New Yorker, 2020, 2:38). It is

evident that lack of safety information from the NYCHA led to many lives lost in the span of even one day.

Discussion/Conclusions

The development of having affordable housing is promising, yet has its limitations. In fact, ensuring that people are being housed is not the main concern. Rather, whether NYCHA ensures good quality is a valid question that should continue to be explored by urban planners, politicians and public health experts.

In a 2018 journal article written for the American Bar Association titled “Public Housing and Public Health: The Separate and Unequal Protection of Private and Public Housing Tenants’ Health in New York City”, Justin R. La Mort argues that tenants living under the NYCHA face multiple health issues in comparison to tenants in private housing. Using the historical aspect of NYCHA, La Mort described the health crises faced by residents, compared that with private housing tenants, then offered solutions on how to resolve them. La Mort wants public officials to take the health of NYCHA residents seriously by proposing increased funding, transparency, accountability and equality. One striking comment made by La Mort is that accountability means there is “communication and consequences for failures” (p. 397). Enforcing a system where the NYCHA faces legal consequences can also be effective in maintaining building quality. As mentioned earlier, tenants who do not pay off rent are easily placed for eviction. However, in cases where NYCHA fails to maintain a building, allowing for rent abatement prevents tenants from being exploited for their money. The more NYCHA neglects to fix infrastructure, the more tenants withhold their rent, leading to landlord revenue loss.

Another way NYCHA can be more effective is by working on actively engaging with tenants. NYCHA currently lacks engagement with their new community focused approach. “When NYCHA comes knocking at their doors with a plan, no matter how conscientiously the authority engages residents, it tends to be perceived as ‘steamrolling’” (Jones, 2019). This may be due to the way residents were treated beforehand. The main population of people living in affordable housing are low-income, working class people of color. If multiple residents complain about the quality of the building, it is reasonable for them to assume, after multiple conversations, their lives do not matter. Instead of greeting residents with a plan, NYCHA should listen to tenants' concerns. The Community Engagement & Partnerships fact sheet claims they engage residents through “forums and targeted communication”. However, online forums do not provide personal connections with tenants. Instead, indirect communication such as the internet fosters a place for misunderstanding. If the NYCHA worked on having in-person meetings with tenants, COVID-19 information would be more accessible and personal. Inquiries on how to receive vaccines and COVID-19 kits could be easily answered through a question/answer seminar with a NYCHA representative. Meetings should be done floor by floor, which helps both NYCHA and tenants have in-depth conversations. Consistent in-person contact between tenants and NYCHA landlords helps build trust and create a level of empathy.

Understanding that poor infrastructure is detrimental to public health should also be recognized by New York City officials. In the United States there is a notion that people who rely on government assistance are lazy. This stereotype affects the policies being made about low-income individuals. Justin R. La Mort (2018) calls attention to this by referencing Dr. Ben Carson, who referred to poverty as “a state of mind” (p. 385). Calling poverty “a state of mind” blames impoverished families for not having the financial resources to survive. The housing act

ensured low-income families will have decent and affordable housing. Yet, tenants living under the NYCHA report on the absence of maintenance work. The “state of mind” ideology overlooks the bigger structural inequalities that many NYCHA residents face today. People look forward to public housing in hopes to fulfill one basic need: safety. Housing shelters people from weather, danger and harmful substances found in the streets. Treating misfortunes like COVID-19 and fire as an individual failing conflicts with the ethics of the NYCHA policies. Paying for low-income housing should not compromise one’s health.

While solving the housing crisis is not a quick fix, financially investing into these structures is not enough. NYCHA faced struggles before the pandemic and will continue to face them in 2022. This is more of a social issue than a political issue. City officials should continue to prioritize the current residents living in public housing as it would help them set the foundation for future tenants. Doing so would not only promote tenant wellness, but give credibility to NYCHA as a whole. Although information on the current conditions of affordable housing is limited, hopefully this will trigger further research which shows the progression and effectiveness of the affordable housing plans and gives a voice to the unheard.

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