

PRESS RELEASE

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Research Report “*Democracy (In)Action*” Finds NYCHA Violates Federal Regulations on Public Housing Resident Participation *Over \$20 Million in Tenant Participation Activities Funds Mismanaged by NYCHA*

New York City, NY – According to a report released this morning, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is violating federal regulations (referred to as the 964 regs) that ensure residents’ participation in policymaking. Among the most egregious violations of the 964 regulations are: 1) mismanaging over \$20 million in funds earmarked for resident participation activities, and 2) making a decision to demolish the Prospect Plaza development in Brooklyn without holding a public hearing. To make matters worse, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) – the chief enforcer of the 964 regulations – is failing to provide the appropriate oversight to ensure that residents can meaningfully and democratically participate.

The report by Community Voices Heard (CVH), an organizing and advocacy group of low-income New Yorkers, many of whom are public housing residents, offers the first comprehensive examination of the official public housing resident participation system. With over 400,000 residents living in 336 developments across New York City, public housing is one of the last bastions of affordable housing in the City. “Numerous studies have shown that good things happen when residents have the power to shape policy, control their housing resources, and access the official structures that represent them,” said Vincent Villano, CVH Policy & Research Coordinator, and the primary author of the report. “Threats to resident participation lead to threats to the preservation of this critical housing stock.”

The report was officially released at a briefing in midtown. Based on a survey with over 1100 public housing residents across the five boroughs, five in-depth focus groups, a review of three years of meeting minutes between NYCHA and public residents, and observations of key resident participation events, the report - *“Democracy (In)Action: How HUD, NYCHA and Official Structures Undermine Resident Participation in New York City Public Housing* - finds that **the official resident participation system is an inactive democracy.**

“What we found was that the vast majority of residents are not participating in, nor getting critical information from an official resident participation system that, in the end, has no formal decision-making power,” said Vincent Villano. “Furthermore, the system does not even run at its optimum level. This is largely due to barriers created by NYCHA’s mismanagement of resources and disregard for resident participation regulations as well as HUD’s lack of oversight and enforcement.”

Anne Washington, a public housing resident of 32 years, spoke of why she has chosen to participate outside of the official structure: “Although I do not participate in my resident association, I am a member of CVH’s public housing campaign. This campaign allows me to be a leader and ensure that my voice is heard in the struggle to save and improve public housing. At CVH, we can present our issues as residents, learn about policy, and target the people who have the power to make the changes we want. We can also participate in the research that can make a difference in our lives.” **Research revealed that the vast majority of residents, much like Anne, do not participate in the official resident participation system – only 17% of survey respondents participated in their resident association and only 14% voted in their resident association’s last election.**

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Shenia Rudolph, a public housing resident of Twin Parks in the Bronx, connected this lack of participation to the everyday problems faced by residents: “If we had more input on NYCHA’s policies, our rents would not be going up, our elevators would be working, capital projects would be done and overseen, and NYCHA would not be paying NYPD \$73 million a year for police services, especially now when we are in a huge deficit.”

In fact, the report showed that **one major barrier to resident input on policy is that the absence of an effective communication system leaves the vast majority of residents without the critical information on NYCHA policies** they need in order to meaningfully participate in policymaking. **For example, 92% of residents surveyed did not know that NYCHA pays the New York Police Department \$73 million for policing services that should already be paid for with their taxes.** Moreover, residents are not getting information on the official resident participation system itself. **Over 80% of respondents had never heard of the resident bodies that represent them at the city level – the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP) and the Resident Advisory Board (RAB).**

Erik Crawford, one of the youngest Resident Association Presidents in the system as well as a member of the RAB, submitted written testimony that highlighted the lack of democracy within the official structures of the system itself as another barrier to participation: “Right now we have a system where you have to be a President of your RA in order to participate in your District Council. We have a system where residents can’t directly vote for the leaders that represent them to NYCHA at the city level. We have a system where over 400,000 residents are represented by 9 people. I think we can and we need to make this system more democratic and more accountable to residents’ needs.” **The report indicated that the current representative structure overburdens official resident leaders by forcing them to serve in multiple positions which, in turn, prevents the existence of about 130 to 161 elected resident offices. Furthermore, research also showed that there was a level of dissatisfaction with the current representation system with only 40% of those residents surveyed feeling that their RA represented their interests.**

Another official resident leader, Gloria Wilson, RA Secretary of UPACA 6 in Manhattan, noted the difficulty she has had in representing residents without access to resources that could boost their capacity: “My particular Tenant Association has existed now for the past 14 years. NYCHA doesn’t give us what we need to encourage the residents to participate. I just found out we had a budget of \$16,000 for 2007 & 2008 for activities. For years, NYCHA didn’t tell us. What are they doing with the money?” **The research uncovered that residents and resident leaders do not currently have the capacity – or the appropriate access to capacity-building resources, like TPA funds – to meaningfully impact policy decisions. NYCHA has mismanaged over \$20 million in TPA funds since 2001 with \$7.6 million spent on something other than resident participation activities and another \$15 million that has yet to be allocated to resident bodies. All the while, HUD has not intervened to ensure that these funds reach the residents.**

The report calls for a strengthening of current policy, implementation, and enforcement so that residents can have real decision-making power. It calls for resident control of adequate resources to build their capacity to develop meaningful and democratic participation. And lastly, it makes recommendations that aim to provide residents with a better ability to participate in official resident leadership structures. “We have concrete examples of resident participation success that we can build on,” said Vincent Villano. **“Since 2001, public housing residents from Toronto have been deciding how \$9 million (13%) of Toronto Community Housing Corporation’s capital budget is spent. This participatory budgeting process has allowed residents to gain skills, build community and assist their housing authority with spending funds in the most efficient way. We can do this in New York City.”**

Following the presentation of report findings and resident testimonies, organizers involved with national efforts to ensure that public housing residents shape the policy that affects them, shared the impact that excluded residents from participatory processes has had on their local communities. Hashim Benford, Lead Organizer for the Miami Workers Center – a founding member of the Right to the City Alliance (a national alliance of racial, economic and environmental justice organizations) – had this to say about the absence of resident voices in policy: “In Miami, we’ve seen firsthand what happens when residents are ignored; homes are destroyed, families are displaced, and entire communities are torn apart.”

Jaron Browne, Lead Organizer for People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER) in San Francisco – also a founding member of the Right to the City Alliance – talked about the challenge residents face holding Housing Authorities accountable: “Just as the report highlights, San Francisco public housing residents consistently report feeling like their opinions and decisions are completely disregarded by the Housing Authority. Residents consistently tell us they feel that the Housing Authority is its own separate government that no one can truly hold accountable.”

Deangelo Bester, Campaign Director of the Housing Justice Movement for National People’s Action (NPA), another grassroots national housing alliance, stressed the relevance of the report’s findings nationally: “The report captured what public housing residents across the country already believed about the importance of full resident participation. I will be encouraging all local groups in NPA’s Housing Justice Movement to use this report to pressure their housing authorities to increase the amount of decision-making present in their resident participation structures and processes.”

Community Voices Heard is a membership organization of low-income individuals that collectively work to have an impact on policies dealing with welfare reform, job creation, workforce development, access to education & training, public housing and economic development. CVH membership, over 30,000 strong, is comprised of welfare recipients, workfare workers, public housing residents, and low-income individuals from NYC, Yonkers, Newburgh, and Poughkeepsie. The report was prepared as part of the CVH Public Housing Preservation & Improvement Campaign. CVH is a member of both the Right to the City Alliance and National People’s Action’s Housing Justice Movement.