

**Testimony of the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development
Commissioner Adolfo Carrión**

**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 other members of the Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development and Insurance. I am Adolfo Carrión, Commissioner at the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (“HPD”). The Twin Parks fire was an incredible tragedy, and we are grateful that you are continuing to focus on the important topic of fire safety as we all work to prevent future fires. We thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I want to take a moment to reiterate that the deadly fire that took place at the Twin Parks North West affordable housing development in the Bronx on Sunday, January 9, 2022 was a devastating tragedy, and our hearts go out to Ms. Clayton who is with us today and all of the residents affected. The City’s heroic firefighters, EMS workers, and first responders sprung into action within minutes, saving many lives. But we continue to mourn the 17 New Yorkers, including 8 children, whose lives were lost that day.

Since then, Mayor Eric Adams and teams from across New York City including HPD have been working tirelessly to respond to this tragedy. Our first priority has been to attend to the immediate needs of these families. Teams from HPD were staffed at the Emergency Management Service Center and have been coordinating with the building owner, the American Red Cross, the New York State Division of Homes and Community Renewal (“HCR”), and our fellow City Agencies to ensure displaced residents have temporary and long-term housing. As Twin Parks is a State-financed property with project-based Section 8 administered by HCR, our colleagues at HCR have taken the lead in working with the residents to identify permanent housing options for any households who did not wish to return to the building. In close coordination with HCR, HPD has been actively working with our partners in the affordable housing community to identify permanent housing options. Despite an outpouring of support from the community and public through the Mayor’s Fund for Twin Parks and concentrated efforts by numerous agencies and organizations, that process remains challenging in large part due to the long-standing housing crisis that has put a safe, affordable home out of reach for far too many New Yorkers. HPD continues to work on multiple fronts to invest in the physical and financial health of our public and affordable housing stock, to produce new affordable housing, and to take a coordinated, aggressive approach to protecting tenants from unsafe living conditions.

HPD takes our role in ensuring the safety of New York City renters extremely seriously. We respond to complaints about a lack of heat, hot water, electricity and running water, among almost 200 additional conditions. Because we have so many important responsibilities, we recognize the need to be surgical in our approach to enforcement beyond the response to complaints. We have programs targeted at buildings that are consistently not up to code. We respond to the concerns of community groups and elected officials about apartment and building-wide issues where tenants are afraid to file complaints for fear of reprisal. Our Housing Litigation Division brings cases in Housing Court against owners who do not remedy outstanding violations and, when necessary, seeks findings of contempt against recalcitrant landlords. And we pair aggressive enforcement actions against bad landlords with programs to provide support to property owners who want to do well by their tenants but may not have the means or the resources to do so.

In addition to HPD's response to complaints, HPD inspectors proactively look for and issue violations for multiple health and safety issues, regardless of whether HPD has received tenant complaints. These issues include lead, mold, carbon monoxide detectors, mice and roaches, double cylinder locks, self-closing doors, smoke detectors and illegal gates.

Because we need tenants and owners to be partners with us in keeping tenants safe, we look forward to continuing to educate them about their rights and responsibilities. As part of its general outreach strategy, HPD educates tenants and owners about health and safety requirements during our general communications with tenants and owners, through updates to our *ABCs of Housing* information guide, which is available in more than 10 languages, and on our webpage on Fire Safety. HPD also conducts regular outreach to owners of the affordable properties it supervises as part of its own subsidized portfolio and strives to ensure that buildings are safe and free of any potential fire hazards. Most recently, HPD issued a directive to the owners and managers of the Mitchell-Lama projects that are under HPD's supervision reminding them of the requirements to post fire safety notices and plans. During site visits, Mitchell-Lama coordinators will monitor their projects for compliance, and we will continue providing training and guidance to owners, managers and residents on fire prevention and safety awareness measures.

I want to stress the role that federal resources play in all these efforts. We are very appreciative of the millions in housing assistance allocated to New York City from the federal government during the past two years. However, additional federal resources and tools are needed to combat a housing crisis that forces far too many New Yorkers to pay too much of their income towards rent or to live in over-crowded or unsafe conditions.

More than ever, the City needs additional funding to protect the quality and longevity of our critical public and affordable housing infrastructure, to provide desperately needed rental assistance, to bolster local housing code enforcement, and to assist small landlords in properly maintaining their properties to ensure the health and safety of tenants. We were encouraged that significant housing investments were included in the Build Back Better Act passed by the House, and that President Biden's Fiscal Year 2023 budget request to Congress includes funds for increasing the affordable housing supply. This funding would increase local capacity for building inspections and code enforcement and provide low-income families and individuals with the stability needed to thrive, while furthering neighborhood revitalization across the country.

Given the tragic event at Twin Parks, we know more can and must be done to protect our fellow New Yorkers. In response to Mayor Adams' Executive Order 12, we are proud to strengthen our partnership with the Fire Department around outreach and education, data collection and sharing, and strategies for enhanced enforcement of the fire code. We have similarly strong partnerships with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Department of Buildings around issues where both agencies have jurisdiction, and these partnerships have strengthened our enforcement and education initiatives. We believe, as Mayor Adams has stressed repeatedly in his discussions of this issue, that education for both property owners and tenants about how to stay safe and what to do in the event of a fire will go a long way towards preventing tragedies like the one at Twin Parks – so that tenants and owners both understand the importance of self-closing doors and to make sure that tenants know whom to contact if their door is not closing properly.

In closing, I want to reenforce the City's commitment to protecting the health and safety of all New Yorkers. We truly believe that each family deserves access to safe and equitable housing, and we appreciate your continued partnership to achieve this goal. Your support and attention remain critical as we work together to address the housing needs of New Yorkers and their families. Thank you for taking time to have this important discussion; we look forward to further collaboration on improving and preserving our existing affordable housing stock for future generations.

Thank you for your time and we look forward to your questions.