



*City Council Oversight Hearing
General Welfare Committee*

The End of the City Hotel Program and Permanent Housing Solutions for Sandy Evacuees
Friday, April 26, 2013

Good afternoon Chair Palma and members of the General Welfare Committee. My name is Seth Diamond, Commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services and today I will discuss the City's Hurricane Sandy hotel and housing recovery program.

In the nearly six months since Hurricane Sandy hit New York City, the hotel program has provided life-saving assistance to 3,000 individuals who entered the program from one of the City's hurricane evacuation facilities or were later forced to seek refuge because of dangerous conditions in their home. The program was constructed in unprecedented time frames and has been sustained over these months in partnership with almost a dozen city agencies, over 50 hotels and other interim placement facilities throughout the city, and a range of service providers.

As you remember, the city initially provided emergency refuge to those threatened by the hurricane at over 70 evacuation sites throughout the five boroughs. These sites provided a safe and much needed place to stay during the storm and its initial aftermath. The City quickly recognized that given the extent of the storm's devastation, longer-term assistance would be necessary. Moreover, almost all of the evacuation sites were in public schools and City colleges that needed to resume classroom and other educational activities. Given the number of people needing assistance and resources, hotels represented the best interim housing option to accommodate remaining evacuees. In a matter of days, starting in mid-November, the City transported over 1,200 individuals from evacuation sites to hotels and other interim placement facilities throughout the city.

As colder temperatures arrived, the City wanted to make additional accommodations available for families and individuals who stayed in their homes during the storm. The first challenge was convincing those households to leave their homes and seek emergency refuge. Working with the National Guard and community-based organizations the city organized a massive door-to-door outreach effort directed particularly to those who were in homes without heat or electricity. Through this effort, over 140,000 doors were knocked on in areas of Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island affected by the storm.

Subsequently, the City's Human Resources Administration (HRA) opened Restoration Centers in affected areas to provide community-based assistance which included DHS' Homebase providers who assisted with re-housing and other case management services. Restoration Centers became the city's entry point for those seeking hotel assistance. The City offered transportation to evacuees through bus service stationed at the Restoration Centers and on other occasions, through local car service to ensure they reached their hotel destination. Over 1,800 individuals accessed the City hotel and housing recovery programs through Restoration Centers or National Guard canvassing.

Once in hotels, households received case management from one of five service providers. Working with the Red Cross, the City also provided substantial food assistance to them. HRA worked with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to allow those with food stamps to use that benefit to purchase prepared meals. HRA also sent providers to hotels to enroll those who needed assistance in the food stamp program, including replacement and emergency food stamps.

To further stabilize households, the City made it a priority to ensure displaced students could attend school by connecting and enrolling families to schools and providing transportation to do so. Community-based counseling, substance use and mental health services were made widely available to those who required them. Caseworkers also continued to work to retrieve necessary documents, connect households to other crucial services including FEMA assistance and other public benefits, and arrange for home repairs.

The City also used those early weeks after the storm to better understand the households we were serving and to develop an assessment of what was needed for their transition to longer-term or permanent housing. During this time, it became clear that the situation required varying responses dependent upon individual circumstances. Some evacuees required only a short-term stay at a hotel pending restoration of power or completion of home repairs. Those whose homes had substantial damage required a longer period of time to apply for FEMA assistance and other benefits, and locate alternative housing. No matter what the individual circumstances, each household in the program was assigned a case manager employed by one of our contracted providers to assess their needs and work with them in establishing and carrying out an exit plan.

Government agencies worked hard to address the varying needs of evacuees. The Housing Recovery Office, the City's Department of Buildings (DOB) and Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) worked to ensure home repairs were made as quickly as possible and identified additional work that needed to be completed. HPD developed a housing portal to register evacuees and provide referrals to low and moderate income units. Acknowledging already scarce resources, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) was able to identify 400 public housing units for those impacted by the hurricane and HPD pulled from their development pipeline 150 Section 8 vouchers for eligible evacuees in our hotel and housing recovery program.

Once the resources were available, case management teams developed individualized transition plans for each household. Our providers transported evacuees to their homes and to NYCHA appointments, gathered information for the Section 8 and NYCHA application process and performed a full range of other tasks needed to make the move out plan a reality. In some cases the plan had to change and a new strategy was developed. Each household who worked with us received care and assistance in trying to identify an appropriate housing option. Regrettably, about 100 household refused to engage with case management staff and have since exited the program.

On March 22, after housing resources had been identified and services were in place, we felt comfortable establishing a deadline for ending the hotel program by the end of April, six months after the storm. With the announcement of the deadline, our case management providers intensified their efforts, working with households to implement their exit plan. NYCHA and HPD committed to determining the eligibility for their programs more quickly and, for those eligible, connecting them to

apartments. HPD performed additional inspection work on damaged homes and more intensive work was done to identify alternatives for those who were not eligible for NYCHA or Section 8.

I am very pleased to report that in the past weeks hundreds of households have been able to move out of hotels. At the time we announced the hotel program would end on April 30, there were approximately 800 households in city hotels. Today that number stands at 488 households.

Of those remaining, 43 households are waiting for repairs so they can return to their homes. Another 249 households are going through the NYCHA and the Section 8 process. Since these households have established a clear housing transition plan with pending move-out dates, we will extend their hotel stays through the end of May. An additional 71 households have seen apartments that match their income levels but rejected such options and, therefore, their hotel stays will end on April 30th as scheduled. There are also 125 households that do not qualify for NYCHA housing or there are no NYCHA units available for their family size. Reasons for NYCHA disqualification can include criminal history, insufficient income or previous issues with NYCHA tenancy. For this group, their hotel stays will end on April 30th as scheduled. Our teams have been working and will continue to work with these evacuees to identify alternatives to the hotel system and connect this group to available resources.

Finally, because I know there has been some confusion, I want to spend a minute to mention the FEMA TSA program that has been available for eligible evacuees during the same period. This program is similar to the City's in that it provides hotel services to those impacted by the storm. Eligible households are given a voucher that they take to a participating hotel. In recent weeks, FEMA has substantially reduced the number of evacuees in its program from a peak of 1,070 in January to about 114 today, a nearly 90 percent reduction. Most of the evacuees in FEMA's system have also left the program without accessing the kind of city resources we have made available for those enrolled in the city program.

The city hotel program has provided critical assistance to Sandy evacuees who suffered overwhelming damage or loss of their homes and were in desperate need of services. The program made it possible for families and individuals to begin the process of reestablishing their lives – and their homes - and the city to better understand the needs of each family. As a result, we helped hundreds of households to overcome their traumatic losses and stabilize their housing situations. This was an enormous undertaking and a significant achievement for which all of us in City government can be very proud.

I'm now available to answer any additional questions you may have.