

Rhea can't do job & aides can't stand him

INSIDE OUT.

After a column appeared here last week about a NYCHA board meeting — accompanying the ongoing Daily News exposé of the deplorable state of public housing in our city — I was contacted by someone on the inside, in upper management at 250 Broadway.

Insisting on anonymity, the source revealed a NYCHA headquarters where the rock-bottom morale doesn't get tallied with the debits and credits in a fiscal audit. This dedicated professional was feeling the frustration that has plagued NYCHA for two years under the agency's chairman, John Rhea.

"Wednesday's Daily News with the photos of the four NYCHA board members and the headline 'Sack Them All' sold like hotcakes around here," the source said. "Most of us couldn't agree more. Forget what the mayor says; the situation here is critical. No one can get anything done at NYCHA. And the ones who suffer most are the tenants."

The source says that when tenants complain about awful and unsafe living conditions, the pain is felt inside the offices of 250 Broadway, where 30% of the workforce consists of NYCHA tenants.

"People here really do want to help," the source says. "But we're as frustrated as the tenants. For example, it can take months to get a door fixed in a building. But it can take just as long for us to get a new piece of computer software that could quicken the system to get that door fixed."

The source says everyone has to fill out reams of forms and get approvals through layer after layer of bureaucracy in order to get something as simple as new software accomplished.

"If we can't cut through the red tape in management positions, how can a tenant get services?" the source asks. "And as well-intentioned as this chairman might be, the problem is at the top. With leadership. Period."

The source said NYCHA's best managers, people with institutional memory who actually know how to expedite services, have joined a mass

exodus from NYCHA under Chairman Rhea.

"Some of them were scheduled to retire," the source says. "But many would have stayed on because they loved their jobs if they felt they were helping to effect change and improve the system. But most bailed out as soon as they could out of utter frustration."

The source ticked off a list of 18 top NYCHA managers who've left under Rhea, from chief financial officer to general manager to general counsel to director of human resources.

A second source, who left NYCHA after decades of service but might have stayed if given a welcome mat, said, "In all my time in government I've never



Denis Hamill

seen a mass exodus like this. A total brain drain. Morale plummeted as soon as Rhea arrived. When he brought in consulting firms from Boston, people who knew housing and cared about residents started heading for the doors. Me included."

A third source from the list concurred with almost everything the first two sources said.

"The constant, bitter feuding on the current board is crippling," said this third source, who worked at NYCHA through five mayoral administrations. "That's why nothing gets done. No money gets spent."

The first source was happy I'd reported that Rhea and the NYCHA

board members showed up 35 minutes late on Wednesday for a public meeting without so much as apologizing to the taxpayers who pay their near \$200,000 annual salaries.

"That's par for the course around here," the source said. "Rhea will show up two hours late for internal meetings and never, ever apologizes. That's insulting. It kills morale to think he thinks your time isn't valuable. It makes people want to leave. And they do."

The first source says the other board members are equally arrogant.

"They all have cars and drivers, and they are always late," the source says. "Plus the board members spend so much time fighting amongst themselves, turf issues, power trips, that little of substance gets done. They have definitely marginalized Gonzalez (Victor Gonzalez, the tenant rep on the board). They give him menial tasks and authority over things the others have no interest in."

Is Rhea lazy?

"No, he puts in a lot of hours," the first source says. "He'll send emails at 3 a.m. I think he wants to do a good job, but Harvard and Wall Street just weren't the right training for public housing. City government and the complexities of the huge and daily human factor overwhelm him."

I said it sounds like Cathie Black without the Jimmy Choo shoes. Another Ivy League corporate-America solution to a job that requires a Ph.D. in street smarts and horse sense.

The first source agreed, adding that under Rhea, middle managers are so afraid to make a mistake that even after requisitions inch through the bureaucracy they are afraid to write a check.

"So the money just sits there," the source says. "Unspent. For years. As the problems mount in the houses. It's a damn shame." Should Rhea be replaced?

"He had good intentions," the source said. "He's smart. Puts in long hours. But he's out of his depth, in way over his head."

If that's the case, then the buck stops on the desk of Rhea's boss right across the street from 250 Broadway in City Hall.

Who needs to turn the NYCHA inside out.

DAILY NEWS INVESTIGATES

BY RICH SCHAPIRO,
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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

THE BATHROOM CEILING in apartment 4B was alive — and Jaimira Paramo feared it would become the death of her kids.

Dark gray mold, with ominous black flecks, spread like festering storm clouds above the shower. The vile fungus slithered down the wall, coating the lid of a TRE-Semme shampoo bottle.

"I had to get out of here," said Paramo, 27, who abandoned the Jackson Houses last year after her 8-year-old boy came down with severe asthma. "My son was getting a lot of attacks. He was being contaminated."

Her tale of rot and ruined health is all too familiar among residents of New York City Housing Authority buildings, where mold often grows unchecked and impatient renters grow irate.

"Not since 1998 have they ever come to fix the mold," said Paramo, the mother of three. "We gave up."

Paramo shared the four-bedroom Bronx apartment with her parents, her brother and her three kids: Adriana, 10, Daniel, 8, and Ismael, 5. She noticed Daniel began suffering asthma attacks after taking a bath. "He wants to sit in the bathtub," she said. "He wants to play. But the minute he came out, he'd be coughing."

The child is now on a daily regime of medication, and can't play any sports. "It's something that's going to affect him for the rest of his life," said Paramo.

The asthma diagnosis is hardly surprising. Kids living in New York public housing are nearly three times as likely to suffer asthma as those in private family houses, a 2010 study indicated.

The figures were 21.8% of children in the projects compared to 7.4% in private homes, according to the Journal of Urban Health.

An earlier study by a different group showed asthma was the leading cause of emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and missed school days in the city's worst neighborhoods.

NYCHA officials couldn't immediately provide the number of mold complaints from its 334 housing projects.

Mayor Bloomberg, on his weekly radio show, defended the beleaguered public housing agency. "Nobody likes landlords," the mayor said. "I can just tell you the bottom line is we are not giving up on NYCHA, and we're not walking away from the residents."

Public Advocate Bill de Blasio receives hundreds of "quality of housing" complaints each year — the No. 1 gripe in his office. He's stunned by NYCHA's inability to handle routine repair complaints without waits of more than a year.

"If toxic mold were growing unchecked in a private building, the city would throw the book at the

landlord," said de Blasio, the former head of New York's Housing and Urban Development office. "Why should tenants in public housing be treated any differently? We owe our tenants apartments that are safe, not a slip of paper telling them it will take 18 months to make a repair."

At the Jefferson Houses, Amayra Ortiz says her wait for help with a mold problem is more like 15 years. Her 14th-floor Manhattan apartment features two bedrooms — both plagued by foul-smelling mold on the walls, closets and ceiling.

Daughters Marielys, 16, and Yakaris, 11, both struggle with asthma, Ortiz said. Boxes of toys and clothes sit in the middle of the bedroom floors to stay clear of the mold. Large plastic tarps cover the closet doors in an effort to keep the sleeping quarters free of the stench. Mold sprouts on the walls alongside their beds.

"It's embarrassing," said Ortiz, who first asked the NYCHA for a new apartment 10 years ago. "You see the way we have to live. . . The management is just playing games while my children suffer."

Ortiz's husband, 63-year-old Gregorio, paints the apartment walls every year before Christmas. But just like Santa Claus, the mold inevitably returns. "He tries so hard to make it right," said Amayra Ortiz, 41. "We just want to live like normal people."

Bronx Community activist the Rev. Frank Skelly said the biggest complaints among his parishioners in public housing are inevitably the same: leaks and mold.

"The NYCHA solution is if you have mold, they paint over it," said Skelly. "And in three months, you're back to where you were. The solutions are not solving the problems."

That's the case in the Paramo apartment, where 58-year-old Camerino and wife, Elvia, 59, still live with their son Hector.

Camerino, a cook at Metropolitan Hospital, was recently diagnosed with asthma, too. He's repainted and replastered the bathroom, only to watch the indomitable mold return . . . and return . . . and return.

Eight separate complaints about the mold were ignored in the last two years, the family says. A NYCHA staffer has stopped by on several occasions, raising hopes that were eventually dashed when no repairs followed.

Camerino, who has no health insurance, now shares his grandson Daniel's asthma medication.

Inside Apartment 4B, the wall behind the toilet is still crumbling. The lime green wall in the hallway is still peeling. The electrical box leaks water near the kitchen.

But unlike his daughter and her kids, Camerino Paramo has no place to go. "We feel we're not worth anything," he said. "I don't like to live like that. I have a family, grandkids. But housing isn't doing anything."


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NYCHA boss Rhea is wrong guy for job, say sources.

Photo by Craig Warga Daily News

NYCHA'S GRAY MONSTER



- Residents live with mold that won't die
- Repairs aren't made for months, or years – or EVER!

Jamaira Paramo and her son Daniel Ramirez live with creeping mold in the Andrew Jackson Houses in the Bronx. Photo by Richard Harbus