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TESTIMONY OF THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY AND
THE COMMUNITY SERVICE SOCIETY
ON NYCHA'S RESIDENT PARTICIPATION FUNDING

New York City Council
Subcommittee on Public Housing
January 30, 2007

The Legal Aid Society is the oldest and largest provider of legal assistance to the poor in the United States. The Society's Civil Practice operates 14 neighborhood offices and city-wide units serving residents of all five boroughs of New York City providing comprehensive legal assistance in housing, public assistance, and other civil areas of primary concern to the poor. The Society is counsel on numerous class-action cases concerning the rights of public housing residents and is counsel to the NYC Public Housing Resident Alliance. The Resident Alliance seeks to inform and network with residents, so that they can have a strong and effective voice

and secure greater accountability in local, state and federal policy decisions that affect public housing in New York City.

The Community Service Society (CSS) is an independent nonprofit organization that addresses urgent problems facing low-income New Yorkers. As part of its housing work, CSS provides technical assistance to the New York City Public Housing Resident Alliance, and to other organizations representing NYCHA residents. We very much appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Public Housing Subcommittee.

In 2001, HUD made available funds to be transferred directly to duly-elected resident councils by the Housing Authorities to support tenant participation activities. In New York City, NYCHA received approximately \$17 million between the years 2001-2004, but as of 2004 none of it was allocated to resident leaders as was intended by HUD and Congress. More has likely been received from HUD since 2004, but NYCHA has provided no information on the status of this money or the back money. We were told by NYCHA that at least \$7.6 million was already spent by NYCHA on items such as art supplies, sports equipment, summer programs, and consultants. However art supplies, sports equipment, summer programs, and consultants are not "resident education activities related to HUD policies and procedure," a requirement of HUD. In almost every jurisdiction outside of New York City, the money was allocated to resident associations and spent for resident empowerment activities.

What makes NYCHA's actions especially disturbing is that there is an urgent need for more effective NYCHA resident participation and the resources to support it. Over 1/3 of NYCHA developments do not have a resident association. In our experience over the past 10 years, the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP) and the Resident Advisory Board (RAB) have not been effective in promoting resident organization, in training resident leadership, in keeping residents informed through their duly-elected leaders, or in strengthening their voice in NYCHA decisions. In part this is because NYCHA has paid only passing, and often disrespectful,

attention to resident participation, doing only what was minimally required under federal law and regulations. The CCOP and the RAB do not operate as independent bodies from NYCHA— they receive their information and advice from NYCHA. Although they represent over 180,000 public housing families and over 80,000 Section 8 families, they have no budget and no independent staff. The CCOP meetings with NYCHA are closed, and the minutes are not distributed by NYCHA or CCOP even to resident association presidents. The nine district chairs that make up CCOP rely on oral communication at monthly district meetings. As a result, what little resident association presidents know depends on what the Chair chooses to tell them, or finds important, within the confines of a monthly meeting. CCOP has not yet found an effective way to communicate with most residents, no less the resident association presidents that are its base. In the 21st century, CCOP is still communicating with smoke signals. The result is that at NYCHA, decisions are made without input from residents or even resident association presidents. There is virtually no communication and thus no opportunity to be a meaningful alternative voice to their landlord, the New York City Housing Authority.

Resident participation funds are urgently needed for resident organization and community education functions. Those functions include hiring resident organizing and office management staff who are independent of NYCHA control; communications equipment such as cell phones and faxes; computer equipment for internet and e-mail access; printers and copiers; posters, paper, and other supplies; and related functions that are essential to educate and empower residents and give them a meaningful voice in the management and operation of the place they call their homes.

Conclusion

Effective NYCHA resident participation requires that the HUD resident participation funds be allocated by NYCHA as intended. But, in our view, distributing the resources will not, by itself, strengthen the resident voice. We urge CCOP, the RAB, and NYCHA to develop a

strategic plan for strengthening resident participation, so that the funds are put to best use in giving residents an effective voice in NYCHA decisions particularly during this difficult budget times. We are willing to work then on such a plan. We urge the City Council to pressure the New York City Housing Authority to allocate the resident participation funds for meaningful resident empowerment activities.

Respectfully Submitted:

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