



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Brian Kavanagh

## Federal, State, and Citywide Elected Officials Write to Mayor and NYCHA Regarding Water at Jacob Riis Houses

BRIAN KAVANAGH September 9, 2022

| ISSUE: **NYCHA**

Mayor Eric Adams City of New York

Chairman Greg Russ

New York City Housing Authority

September 9, 2022

Dear Mayor Eric Adams and Chair Greg Russ:

We, the local representatives of NYCHA's Jacob Riis Houses and other elected officials, write to express our grave concern regarding the recent test results that indicated there may have been arsenic in the tap water, and further reports yesterday regarding Legionella. Below is a list of questions and concerns we expect the City and NYCHA to address. Regardless of the City's findings, residents of Jacob Riis Houses and other developments have a lack of trust in NYCHA and expect full transparency.

[Preliminary Results Showing Traces of Arsenic and Recent Reports Regarding Legionella](#)

On Friday, September 2nd, many of our offices were informed by NYCHA that there may be arsenic in the tap water of Riis Houses. Therefore, a decision was made to discontinue use of consuming or cooking with the water. Through our conference Zoom meetings with the relevant City agencies, we were informed that subsequent testing by the NYC Department of Environmental Protection (NYC DEP) showed no levels of arsenic. We were also informed that the vendor that NYCHA had originally used for testing for bacteria, also tested for metals like arsenic even though they are not certified with NYC DEP to do this kind of testing. Yesterday, the media reported the City's announcement that the original tests also indicated traces of Legionella, but we understand that the City does not believe these results were accurate either. Here are several follow up comments and questions we have regarding this information:

- Why make the vendor test for metals at all? How was this decision made?
- NYCHA should provide a copy of the “Annual Roof Tank Inspection Report” to reflect the condition of the tank at the time of inspection.
- Can the water that was sampled by the vendor be re-tested by NYC DEP? Can DEP otherwise provide specific information as to why the reported results of those tests appear to be invalid?
- Is it possible that flushing the system led to the subsequent negative test results, rather than that the original testing was inaccurate?
- Could the construction work on the site of Riis Houses related to resiliency work have had any impact on the contamination?
- We would like confirmation that NYCHA will discontinue the contract with the vendor who provided the original results.

Communication and Transparency

This situation that occurred over Labor Day weekend and into this week has made a huge impact on residents' trust of the City and NYCHA. All of our offices have received inquiries regarding this matter. One of the biggest challenges here was communication to residents. Although we understand City agencies wanting to have complete results before issuing any guidance to residents, it is unacceptable that residents have gone several days without answers. Robocalls stating “preliminary tests show no detection of arsenic” are not sufficient. We request that the City provide information and test results to all residents and make the information public.

- We ask that the City commit to testing the Jacob Riis Houses water supply on a bi-monthly basis for the next 6 to 12 months in order to monitor the situation.
- We also ask that NYCHA conduct water tests in neighboring developments where concerns over water safety have become prevalent to ensure there are no larger infrastructure or water system issues that need to be addressed and that all residents have clean and safe drinking water.
- We believe that it is critical that NYC DEP and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene be involved in communicating with the residents on issues related to the ongoing safety of the water supply system and the health implications of any contamination.

### Health Impacts to Residents

Since the alert of arsenic, several residents have contacted our offices sharing their medical challenges. Most residents believe this had to do with the original cloudy water findings, or current conditions of the water supply. During this investigation and testing period, several residents have reported black sand like materials coming out of their water faucets. We expect that the City will issue health guidance to all residents sharing what they can do if they suspect they were ill from tap water.

## Compensation for Residents

Although the city has been providing bottled and canned water, the supply has been low several times, and residents have gone out and purchased their own water at local stores and supermarkets. Residents have also had to purchase food for their families since they could not cook with water. We are hoping that NYCHA and the City find ways to compensate residents and households for their financial burden. Several ideas are listed below:

- For those receiving public assistance, they receive an increased allotment in food stamps
- Households receive \$200 gift cards
- NYCHA examines rent abatements for all families in Jacob Riis Houses
- Support efforts for ongoing community meetings with health experts to continue to explain results

We look forward to NYCHA and the City addressing our comments, recommendations and questions. We hope to get a response in a week from the Administration so we can share responses from residents who have already been through quite the ordeal.

Sincerely,

Harvey Epstein, Assemblymember (District 74)

Nydia Velázquez, Congressmember (District 7)

Brad Hoylman, State Senator (District 27)

Brian Kavanaugh, State Senator (District 26), Chair, Senate Housing Committee

Brad Lander, New York City Comptroller

Jumaane Williams, New York City Public Advocate

Mark Levine, Manhattan Borough President

Alexa Aviles, Councilmember (District 38), Chair, Committee on Public Housing

Carlina Rivera, Councilmember (District 2)