

Housing Authority Tenants Take Home Repairs Into Their Own Hands

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On a bright day in April, Ivis Rosado opened her kitchen windows to allow dust to escape from her fifth floor apartment in the Andrew Jackson Houses, while her father, Fernando, diligently worked on chipping layers of plaster from her hallway walls. For the first time in 30 years, the patchwork of plaster piled on by New York City Housing Authority maintenance workers was coming off. As Rosado sat in her kitchen to keep from inhaling the dust from the debris, her father worked on giving his daughter a new home.

For three weeks, Rosado's South Bronx apartment was turned upside down as she and her father worked from 7 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon, just before her four children returned from school. By the time her father finished repairing the apartment, Rosado had amassed 16 contractors' bags full of debris while her living room, which no one was allowed to venture into, was transformed into a small workshop, filled with sheetrock, compound, work tools, and a cutting table.

Do-it-yourself repairs have a way of turning any home upside down. But they're especially traumatic when they have to happen because a landlord has failed to maintain an apartment in livable condition. For Ivis Rosado and thousands of other tenants, that landlord is the New York City Housing Authority, or NYCHA, the biggest residential property owner in New York City.

Across the city, NYCHA tenants have decided to take repairs into their own hands, as the authority staggers under a massive backlog of repairs. Among the Housing Authority's 178,000 apartments, more than 700,000 work orders currently await completion and another 300,000 are in the pipeline for the next few months. Leaks, cracked walls, rodent infestations, broken cabinets and appliances and other deterioration demand the constant attention of the authority's work crews.

Tenants who call NYCHA's Customer Call Center, the central hotline for all repair requests, are frequently told the wait time for someone to come out to assess the problem is anywhere from six months to a year, depending on the nature of the repair. As a result, tenants like Rosado have stopped waiting. Another public housing do-it-yourselfer is Yasmen Santiago of Gravesend Houses in Coney Island. Santiago, a single mother who lives with her young daughter, has lived at Gravesend for 15 years and has rarely relied on the Housing Authority to tend to her repair needs. She regularly paints her apartment. She laid down linoleum flooring throughout and even installed new cabinets in her kitchen. Compared to other apartments at Gravesend Houses, Santiago's unit is so meticulous that during the yearly housing inspection conducted by HUD, the NYCHA staff at Gravesend make sure to take the federal officials inside for a visit.

Jeanette Ruiz, a tenant of Baruch Houses on the Lower East Side, asks her coworkers to help her with repairs whenever a problem arises. She says she has given up on NYCHA.

Tenants like them can be found throughout the New York City Housing Authority's 334 complexes.

At a time when housing authorities across the country are demolishing buildings because they are too badly damaged to repair, New York has been able to keep almost all of its buildings standing. But the Housing Authority has a backlog of \$7 billion in needed repairs.

The huge amount of deferred maintenance is now catching up with NYCHA, which expects a \$138 million cut this year to its already pared \$3 billion operating budget, which includes salaries for maintenance staff. The agency has cut one in ten of its maintenance workers over the last six years, even as the number of work orders coming in each year has soared. Meanwhile the authority's capital budget, which pays for big investments such as roofs, plumbing and elevators, currently has a \$13 billion gap through 2015. Costs to maintain aging buildings over the years have risen while the rents paid by an increasingly poorer population have stagnated.

In the face of tenant frustration, last year NYCHA created a special repair team to target 10,000 apartments in buildings with the heaviest load of backed-up work orders. That effort is already yielding results, says authority spokesperson Sheila Stainback.

"In just 6 months, the repair teams that include carpenters, plumbers, plasterers and maintenance workers successfully completed nearly 40,000 repair work orders," she said. As a result of the special task force, she added, authority maintenance crews were able to tackle 6 percent more repair work orders in 2011 than in 2010. "Expedite maintenance and repairs" is a top goal in NYCHA's recently released Roadmap for Preservation, which calls for a big dent in the backlog this year and ongoing efforts to make sure the authority doesn't fall behind on repairs again.

At her State of the City address last month, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn announced a new initiative with the Housing Authority that would help alleviate an estimated 100,000 outstanding repair requests. The council expects to funnel \$10 million to NYCHA, which will allow it to hire 176 residents to complete some of the repairs. The authority said that approximately half of the new jobs will be given to graduates of the Resident Training Academy, which provides construction and janitorial related training, while the rest will be given to other public housing residents.

But in the meantime, tenants like Rosado are taking the DIY route. Public housing is the only home they've ever known, and overhauling their apartments is their way of holding on to their homes.

Skills handed down through generations

Nearly 30 years ago, Rosado remembers, green painted walls greeted her as she moved into her new home in the Andrew Jackson Houses in the Mott Haven neighborhood of the Bronx. From an early age, Rosado learned what it meant to be self-sufficient as she watched her mother, Carmen, fix up the apartment when she got tired of waiting for NYCHA to come around. By the time her mother moved out of the apartment, Ivis could count wall painting, plastering, and general maintenance work as part of her skill set.

The most persistent problem, which to this day still affects tenants who live on the B and C line apartments, is a leak stemming from a broken pipe located on the 16th floor of Rosado's building. For more than 30 years, the leak has caused the plaster on the

bathroom ceiling and adjacent hallway walls of her 5th floor apartment to dampen. White chunks of plaster from the ceiling would continuously chip and fall onto the floor. Rosado's mother temporarily fixed the problem by installing a drop ceiling in her bathroom. Rosado recalls her mother taking the tiles from the drop ceiling down to collect the accumulated plaster.

After her mother moved to Florida 15 years ago, Rosado took over the apartment, inheriting her mother's do-it-yourself attitude toward getting repairs done. She also took on the never-ending leak and the ceiling that rained down with it. After taking a shower, Rosado and her children would often have to rinse their hair repeatedly to remove the plaster that had fallen on them while in the bathroom. Rosado would like to place a new drop ceiling, but right now she can't afford the addition.

Over the years another leak, in her son's room, caused a gaping hole to form in his closet, exposing the hollow interior between his room and the apartment next door. It also gave waterbugs a portal into the apartment. Her son is prone to asthma attacks aggravated by exposure to cockroaches and damp environments, and she would not let him spend time in his room; instead, he had to rotate sleeping between his sisters' and mother's rooms. The only one allowed into the bedroom was the family cat, to keep the waterbug population in check.

Maintaining a safe and comfortable home for her children is a priority for Rosado. The past two years have been particularly violent for the Jackson Houses, where seven people have been shot and killed. Last summer, a friend of Rosado's was gunned down in front of her building, located just a block away from the nearest police precinct. She wants her home to be a haven so her children won't be tempted to hang out outside.

'Ultimately, whatever we're trying to do is patchwork.'

The 16-story Andrew Jackson Houses, named for the 19th century president, are 50 years old. Although the seven massive structures near Yankee Stadium were built to withstand years of use, time guarantees deterioration.

Getting a repair made through the Housing Authority is a lengthy process. A tenant must first obtain a work order ticket through the Customer Contact Center (CCC), which handles emergency and routine repairs for the authority, by scheduling an appointment with a maintenance worker. If the repair is a simple one, the worker will do the job. But if the maintenance worker determines the repair must be performed by a skilled tradesperson, such as a carpenter, plasterer, or plumber, the resident will then be assigned a reference number and asked to contact the call center after 48 hours to schedule the repair.

Before the call center came fully online in 2007, tenants would visit the local management office located at each development and fill out a paper ticket with their repair needs. According to Rosado, in the Jackson Houses a maintenance worker would inspect a repair issue within two weeks, and sometimes even the same day. If a work order appeared delayed, residents could personally take up the issue with the staff in the management office.

Local management offices are no longer the front line for repair requests. With the CCC, which handles upwards of 8,000 phone calls per day, tenants are routinely given appointments as far as a year from the time they make their request.

Stainback of the Housing Authority says that inadequate funding from the federal government has fueled delays and deterioration. Without additional capital funds, she says, “Ultimately, whatever we’re trying to do is patchwork. The more time that goes by where those needs aren’t met, the buildings continue to age.”

Part of the problem may be of the authority’s own making, tenants say, as workers turn to provisional fixes for deep structural problems. Rosado has seen the practice firsthand as workers for decades have plastered over the damage from the persistent leak in her building, over and over again. In her apartment over the years, NYCHA workers had slathered layers of plaster on the hallway wall buckled by the leak, leaving the corridor so narrow that only one person could pass through at a time.

A neighbor steps into the breach

A neighbor of the Rosados, Danny Barber, has stepped into the breach. He is the tenant association president for the Andrew Jackson Houses, and each week Barber conducts a vertical tour through every building in the complex. He starts his inspection on the 16th floor and walks down every building, stopping at the landings, looking for the scourges typical of common areas in public housing: graffiti in the stairwells, garbage bags in the hallways, floors that are disturbingly sticky. If he sees that a doorknob to a tenant’s apartment is missing, or if a light fixture in the hallway is broken, he makes a note of it and puts in a work order for the repair.

Like Rosado, Barber, 42, is a lifelong resident of Jackson Houses. He is also the most formidable voice for the tenants at Jackson, having turned his volunteer duties as president into a full-time if still unpaid job. In his eight years in the position, Barber has become a thorn in NYCHA’s side, using the high-level contacts he’s made in the authority and in the mayor’s office to ensure that NYCHA carries out its duties as a landlord in a timely manner. Whenever an elevator is out of service, a call from Barber to the local management office usually guarantees that it will be back in action within the hour.

For larger, more complicated repairs, like persistent leaks or floods in residents’ homes, Barber will go as far as placing a call to Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott’s office or copying NYCHA Chairman John Rhea on an email. Most of the time, Barber’s tenacity forces NYCHA to respond in a way the authority normally does not to tenants’ complaints or repair needs. But even he is powerless to the budget deficit currently plaguing NYCHA, which has allowed for crucial structural problems at Jackson to go unaddressed.

Rosado had phoned in her request to the call center in March 2010 to report the gaping hole in her son’s closet, only to receive a repair ticket dated April 2011. Rosado continued to call the customer call center, reminding the agents that conditions made the room uninhabitable for her asthmatic son. They, in turn, reminded that there were no exceptions once an order ticket with a date was printed for a specific complaint.

In desperation, Rosado sought Barber’s help, and Barber personally put in a round of work orders. He asked Rosado to give him a month for the repairs to get made. Tired of waiting on NYCHA, Rosado called in her father, Fernando, a handyman by profession. Fernando arrived at her house with a small yellow tool bag. He painstakingly chipped away the layers of built-up plaster on the hallway walls, closed the hole in her son’s room, and placed tiles on the bathroom wall to keep it from falling down. He also repainted the entire apartment and put a finish on the kitchen cabinets.

The entire project took three weeks. But the work never really ends: because the leak persists Ivis' father still must return every few weeks to patch up the plaster on the ceiling above the showerhead. When he left, he had accumulated such a large collection of drills, tables and machines that Rosado had to borrow a truck to bring the collection of equipment back to his house.

Rosado's father not only donated his labor but also spent several hundred dollars on materials. The entire cost for the repairs totaled \$1,200.

Barber applauds Rosado's father for stepping in and helping his family to feel comfortable in their home. "He's willing to sacrifice his time," says Barber, "and he's willing to give up all his money to fix the problem in the building to help the Housing Authority."

Evicted for installing a Jacuzzi

The leases tenants sign with the Housing Authority clearly state what a tenant can and cannot do in an apartment. Both painting and altering the structure of a unit are forbidden. Yet the agency knowingly turns a blind eye when tenants make their own repairs. Stainback confirms that the agency has yet to pursue eviction proceedings against tenants who do their own repairs, so long as their apartment passes inspection, does not pose any danger, and is free of structural damage. Just one tenant has ever been evicted for altering an apartment; he had installed a Jacuzzi.

Tina Turner, a manager at Bay View Houses in Brooklyn in the 2000s, says DIY repairs were not uncommon or unknown when she was at the authority. Whenever a resident moves out, housing staff responsible for maintaining the development return the apartment to its original condition before a new tenant moves in. At Bay View Houses, the management staff has encountered DIY alterations ranging from new kitchen cabinets to an apartment with wall-to-wall marble flooring.

Not every tenant has the means and the resources to do their own repairs. Jeanette Otano, another Jackson resident who has lived in the development for nine years, is also battling a leak in her bathroom ceiling. When Otano, who lives on the fifth floor of a building adjacent to Rosado's, saw a crack in her ceiling, she called NYCHA because she knew what the outcome would be.

NYCHA workers did not come soon enough. The small crack worsened as moisture from a toilet bowl leak in the above apartment persisted, causing the plaster to break off in large chunks and cover Jeanette's floor, sink, toilet and bathtub. Once parts of the ceiling fell, damaging Otano's bathroom furniture, NYCHA sent a worker to inspect the damage. The authority has a policy of responding to emergencies within a 24-hour period.

Since then, though, the urgency has vanished. In November, just three months after her ceiling had been patched up, a soggy layer of plaster and paint, created by the persistent toilet bowl leak, fell onto the floor exposing part of Otano's ceiling. Just like in Rosado's apartment, the patchwork only temporarily fixed the problem.

When Otano phoned the call center on November 20, 2010, she learned that her ceiling would not be fixed until May 2012. Like Rosado, Otano reached out to Barber, who then made calls and was able to help speed up her appointment.

Otano, however, is bracing to repeat the ordeal. Until the upstairs leak is fixed, her ceiling will keep accumulating moisture, making it likely it to break apart and fall once again.

Some tenant advocacy groups around the city have begun to pursue other strategies to generate results for tenants who can no longer endure the long wait for repairs to be made. They have been taking cases to Housing Court. Some tenants also withhold rent to force action.

Danny Barber looks for solutions closer to home. He is convinced that regular tenant involvement and participation in Jackson Houses tenant association meetings, which usually see the same 20 or so loyal residents, could curb some of the persistent problems plaguing the buildings. He is disappointed when tenants compound existing decay by vandalizing buildings and elevators, breaking the glass panes from building entries, or dumping trash in the hallways. Frustrated at the apathy that he sees, Barber often thinks of quitting his post, and Rosado jokingly threatens to kill him if he ever seriously considered stepping down.

Rosado and Barber walk to the corner store on their block every morning to buy a cup of coffee. They return to the Andrew Jackson Houses and find a bench outside to sit and talk. Now that her house is habitable once again, she says, "I can finally take a breath."