

For Immediate Release: Wednesday, May 20, 2009
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Report: Poor Housing Conditions Harming Asthmatic New Yorkers

ELECTED OFFICIALS, HEALTH & HOUSING ADVOCATES URGE CITY TO CRACK DOWN ON ASTHMA TRIGGERS

New York – Today the Coalition for Asthma-Free Homes, a multi-borough coalition of health, housing and environmental advocates, was joined by Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and Councilmember Rosie Mendez to release a report documenting how asthma triggers in New Yorkers' homes – combined with a lack of enforceable guidelines to curb them – are contributing greatly to the city's high asthma rates. Citing several studies that link asthma with poor housing conditions, the report calls for the passage of the Asthma-Free Housing Act, Intro 750, which would strengthen the City's code enforcement system to reduce indoor allergens, like cockroaches, mold and mice, in asthmatic tenants' residences.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum said: "This is a clear-cut public health issue. No one with asthma – a group that includes a large number of New York City children – should have to live in an apartment with health hazards like pests and mold. Today's report shows an undeniable relationship between indoor allergens and high asthma rates, and makes it clear that the current city law has failed to protect New Yorkers from those allergens."

Councilmember Rosie Mendez said: "This administration has taken some ambitious steps to improve the public health in New York City. There have been major efforts to cut smoking rates and reduce obesity, but asthma is a particularly dangerous threat to children - especially in poor communities. It's time to address asthma triggers where children live. The Asthma Free Housing Act will save lives."

With 25 sponsors in the City Council, Intro 750 would require apartment owners with tenants susceptible to respiratory problems to inspect dwellings for indoor allergen hazards and remove them. It would also require the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to inspect dwellings for asthma allergens upon complaints from asthmatic tenants, issue C-level violations for hazardous violations, and remedy these violations when a landlord does not. While HPD considers some conditions to violate the Housing Maintenance Code, there is currently no enforceable protocol for assessing and remedying such conditions.

Harvey Epstein, Director of the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center said: "The link between asthma and housing conditions is undeniable. A housing code enforcement system that does not recognize this link leaves asthmatic New Yorkers stuck in homes where they are unable to breathe. This report helps connect the dots between cause and effect."

Artemio Guerra, Director of Organizing and Advocacy for the Fifth Avenue Committee said: "Cockroaches, mice infestations and mold are the top three allergens found in homes and are an immediate threat to the health of asthmatic tenants, yet these triggers are seldom classified as housing violations. It's time to change that."

As the report documents, New York City has the highest asthma rate in the country, asthma is the leading cause of school absences and it is the most common cause of hospitalization in the city. Over

300,000 New York City children have asthma, and roughly 80% of asthma found in them is triggered by exposure to asthma allergens.

Cockroach infestations – a leading asthma trigger – are most severe in low-income neighborhoods in upper Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx. A map of cockroach levels by neighborhood is available.

Jesse Goldman, Environmental Justice Organizer of Make the Road New York said: “In New York City, low-income people of color have the highest incidence of asthma. About 22 percent of children in low-income neighborhoods have asthma, compared to 14 percent in high-income neighborhoods. Low-income Latinos are twice as likely to suffer from asthma than any other group in the city.”

Bushwick resident and Make the Road New York member Luisa Mejia was recently hospitalized for several days in Woodhull Hospital for an asthma attack, and her son, daughter and granddaughter all have severe asthma. “There is a lot of mold in our bathroom, and the landlord refuses to fix the leak that causes it. Instead, he sends workers to paint over the mold. After a few weeks the mold comes back. There is also a major roach and mice infestation in the building.” Ms. Mejia’s landlord has not corrected the mold and vermin violations that trigger her families’ asthma despite several complaints.

Bronx resident Teanna Price is a 25 year old single mother with a 4 month old son. In March, she brought her son to Jacobi Medical Center for a bad cough. “My son was diagnosed with bronchiolitis and his doctor thinks our apartment conditions, like peeling paint, might be contributing to the problem. We’ve had to go to court to get the landlord to fix things. There should be better protections to prevent these potentially lifelong problems.”

Other details of the legislation:

- Even in apartments without susceptible persons, visible mold would be a B violation, and a C violation if in excess of 10 square feet in any one room or 50 square feet in total (current threshold is 25 square feet in any one room); similar provisions would apply to common areas.
- Landlords would be required to correct indoor allergen hazards and underlying defects upon turnover of vacant apartments.
- After HPD serves a violation, landlords would have 21 days to make repairs using safe work practices, or up to 60 days in certain circumstances if needed.
- The DHMH and HPD would create a system to allow health professionals -- upon consent of asthma patients -- to request the DHMH investigate possible indoor allergen hazards.
- Removal of indoor allergen hazards would be done according to rules established by HPD with the approval of DHMH. The Coalition urges the use of Integrated Pest Management systems for hazard removal, which do not use toxic pesticides.

The Coalition for Asthma-Free Homes (CAFH) includes the American Lung Association in New York, Fifth Avenue Committee, Make the Road New York, New York Immigration Coalition, Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, Urban Justice Center, and We Act for Environmental Justice. Additional co-sponsors of the bill include Councilmembers Avella, Baez, Barron, Brewer, Foster, Gerson, Gioia, Gonzalez, Jackson, James, Koppell, Liu, Mark-Viverito, Martinez, Mealy, Palma, Recchia, Reyna, Seabrook, Stewart, Vann and Yassky.

“The Impact of Poor Housing Conditions on the Health of Asthmatic New Yorkers” can be found at <http://www.urbanjustice.org/ujc/publications/community.html>