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A Rising Clamor for Compassion

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By the time Mimi Rosenberg, a longtime senior staff lawyer at the Legal Aid Society, arrived at a meeting for tenants of the Red Hook Houses in Brooklyn on Monday evening, she had already had what many of us might have considered a day of time travel, enduring work that would seem to have spirited her back to the era of Jacob Riis.

Ms. Rosenberg had been in housing court, advocating for the rights of a man with advanced bone cancer who was fighting eviction from a public-housing complex in Coney Island on the grounds of unpaid rent. The client, Ms. Rosenberg told me, was withholding payment because he said the New York City Housing Authority had failed to deal with mold infestation in his apartment. That the authority was behaving so ungenerously toward someone so ill — someone whose troubles were then compounded by Hurricane Sandy, which trapped him in his apartment and left him unable to get to chemotherapy — would have surprised few of those gathered in the room, people prone to believe that the authority, even under ordinary circumstances, operates at a level of compassion somewhere between Howard Roark's and J. Edgar Hoover's.

The meeting, overseen by the authority's new general manager, Cecil R. House, was meant to address the aftermath of the storm. The Red Hook Houses, one of the city's oldest developments and home to more than 6,100 residents, were in the dark for days after the hurricane, and still on Nov. 19, three weeks after the storm, there were issues. One tenants' representative stood up to explain that there were apartments in her building that were still without heat. But mostly what one heard was a litany of miseries, testament to all the ancillary misfortunes of poverty and all the accompanying expressions of frustration and rage: from the diabetic woman who had no place to safely store her insulin during the power failure and nowhere to safely care for her autistic son; from the woman with sickle-cell anemia whose apartment was still cold; from the lifelong resident who spoke of a young girl's rape.

"Where were you?" that last resident asked Mr. House in what would become the evening's refrain. Where were members of the housing authority in the days immediately after the storm, when things were the most unmanageable and terrifying?

If the meeting achieved anything, it was to reveal how deeply in opposition the reality of public-housing tenants is with the reality inhabited by the administrators to whom they are beholden. Mr. House, an alumnus of a California utility company, calmly fielded unrelenting criticism, saying that yes, staff members from the housing authority indeed had been on the ground, even as resident after resident attested to seeing no one but volunteers, a local politician or a local judge. Mr. House pledged to fix this radiator, solve that problem, but of course he could do very little to alleviate the longstanding mistrust residents feel toward the system — mistrust that the authority's response to the storm has only served to heighten.

“They are neglecting us as human beings,” Ada Soto remarked to me as the meeting was breaking up on Monday. Ms. Soto, who suffers from osteoporosis, arthritis and asthma, works at the Target store near the Barclays Center. As of Monday, her apartment in the Red Hook Houses still did not have hot water. She lost days of work because of the storm — days for which she will not be compensated. In addition, like so many other residents, she incurred various out-of-pocket expenses — for coolers, ice, flashlights and so on — spending funds the poor obviously don't maintain in great reserve.

On Dec. 1, Ms. Soto's rent of \$391 is due but Ms. Soto does not have the money. The housing authority is offering an abatement, for days that the storm left tenants without vital services — power, running water, working elevators — but the abatement is not being offered until January, a move that seems to betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the vulnerabilities of poverty: tenants are without the cash right now.

What the authority is offering hurricane victims in a comic display of its disconnect, according to its Web site, is free tickets to Carnegie Hall: You may have had to walk 12 flights up and down to your apartment for days, in fear, and you may still be unable to comfortably shower, but for your troubles, we offer you the Venezuelan Brass Ensemble.

Bound to worsen the authority's ongoing image problem is that residents now feel emboldened enough to march and to sue. The day after the meeting, I spoke with Wally Bazemore, a longtime resident of the Red Hook Houses and a community advocate, who among other involvements serves on the board of a local charter school. Mr. Bazemore, who lives with his blind, 93-year-old mother, had been without power until Nov. 16. He made it his business to patrol the grounds of the projects with a flashlight and to check in on his older neighbors. “We were all we had,” Mr. Bazemore said. And by “we” he meant not only the other residents of the Red Hook Houses, but those living just beyond the projects.

“The flood brought us closer together,” he told me. “New people who came to Red Hook three or four years ago seemed aloof,” he said. “But now we’re working toward bridging those gaps.”

Everyone is angry at the housing authority. “We’re really going to make a stink,” he said. “They haven’t seen anything yet.”

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