

## Tenants look to cameras for safety

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An iPhone displays a four-way view of the Mott Haven Houses lobby that security cameras keep monitored.

Public housing tenants around the city are feeling nervous about their safety, surveys show, and two new initiatives being pioneered in the South Bronx are aimed at helping them feel safer.

But while both initiatives call for security cameras inside NYCHA buildings to help protect residents, housing officials support one, while rejecting a method tenant leaders say would watch out not only for criminals, but for abusive housing workers and heavy-handed police officers.

There are security cameras in roughly a fifth of NYCHA's 2,602 buildings around the city, to help police protect residents according to the Housing Authority, but tenants remain on edge about crime.

"Three of four residents in public housing complexes are "fearful of crime in their development," according to a NYCHA survey conducted earlier this year. More worryingly, "55% of respondents reported that they do not leave their apartments due to fear of crime," according to the report.

Some tenant associations have formed patrol programs, with tenants guarding lobbies in some buildings. But these unarmed guards are vulnerable when they try to deny access to people who can't prove they live in the buildings.

"When they do get in, they may be belligerent," said John Johnson, president of the Mott Haven Houses Tenant Association.

To address these worries, City Council member Maria del Carmen Arroyo, who serves Mott Haven, is pushing to have security systems installed in all the public housing complexes in her district, and not just cameras.

Arroyo has allocated \$3.2 million through 2012 to install comprehensive security systems, at the Jackson, Mitchell, Moore, Mott Haven, and Patterson developments in Mott Haven and Melrose, according to her office.

Mott Haven Houses will get a \$250,000 federal grant from the department of Housing and Urban Development, to install what NYCHA calls a "layered access control system," with new intercoms, electronic keys, and mechanical door locks for all building entrances. It would also allow tenants to easily replace or cancel lost keys, and provide remote monitoring city authorities can use to detect any damage to cameras or doors. "Securing building entrances is essential to improving the security of our developments," said a NYCHA representative in an email.

The system will operate on fiberoptics rather than phone lines, so tenants would no longer need a landline connection to use the intercoms in their apartments. Johnson expects the system to be installed in the Mott Haven Houses by early next year.

But some tenant associations say residents should have a greater say in their own safety, and in choosing the security system that works best for them. They are taking matters into their own hands.

Both the Mott Haven and Moore developments have had security cameras installed through an organization called the Digital Divide Partnership, a collaboration between non-profit and for-profit businesses and the New York State Office for Technology. Using this system, cameras stream live video feeds anyone, including residents, can access over the internet.

In addition to increased safety and oversight, the systems installed by Digital Divide Partnership provide free wifi access to building residents, and are solar powered to conserve energy.

The tenant-monitored system would provide more protection than the NYCHA cameras, which are only consulted after police suspect a crime has occurred, its proponents insist.

NYCHA officials disapprove of the initiative.

“As these systems do not meet our security standards, they are not part of the recommendations for future installations,” a NYCHA official wrote in an email, Yet tenant leaders insist they are within their rights, citing a statute from the HUD Code of Federal Regulations, which states that “HUD promotes resident participation and the active involvement of residents in all aspects of a housing authority’s overall mission and operation.”

“We want a virtual tenant patrol,” said Lou Torres, president of the Moore Houses Tenant Association. Rotating shifts of residents would monitor cameras from their apartments, and call 911 when an incident occurs, he said. The tenant-monitored system would allow tenants to watch not only for criminal activity, but for abusive treatment of NYCHA residents by police and housing workers, activists add, addressing what they say is a common complaint of public housing tenants around the city.

“We have police here harassing tenants all the time,” said Torres. Johnson, who serves on a board of NYCHA tenant leaders, was arrested last September while attending a memorial service in the Mott Haven Houses where he lives. He said he fields complaints from Torres about tenants being harassed nearly every week.

“It’s unfortunate that this has to be part of the conversation,” said Councilwoman Arroyo. “Why not have both?” says Johnson. Using both the NYCHA security systems and tenant monitoring, “It would be more layers of security,” he said.

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