

TESTIMONY OF:

Deluwara (Dinu) Ahmed, East Elmhurst Resident

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I have been a resident of East Elmhurst, Queens for nearly twenty years and have been a lifelong resident of New York City. My block has been impacted by severe and toxic sewage back into our homes twice in the last fourteen years. On September 1, 2021, nearly five feet of sewage water pushed into my home so forcefully that I heard a huge boom in my home. The front door of my basement ripped off the wall and black water gushed up the stairs so high we were left counting the few steps that remained before the water reached the main floor. I live with my elderly mom, and I cannot adequately convey how scared we were at the rate at which the height of water was advancing. I truly was afraid about whether or not we would survive. I rushed to barricade the door to the main floor with furniture and rice bags, and called 911 twice that night, to no response. No one responded when I called 311 either. I looked out the window and saw cars uncontrollably adrift, a woman wading waist deep in the street, people yelling for help. We felt utterly alone that night.

This is what happened. All of us with wooden backyard doors and door frames had back basement exits that became swollen and jammed shut. One of our neighbors was left to climb on a table while multiple people had to work to pry the back door open and pull her out. I was in the basement just moments before the door gave way. I don't think I would have survived that night had I still been downstairs. All of our sump pumps were overcome.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, we remained alone. I stayed up multiple nights trying to contact someone, anyone, to help us with the wreckage and debris cleanup. I called 311, mold remediation teams, junkyard services, Red Cross. No one was on the ground to help me and my neighbors. What were we to do? We were left to plunge into toxic wastewater without the necessary protective wear to do our own cleaning. My neighborhood has a large elderly and immigrant population. There was no one here educating the neighborhood about being safe in our cleanup processes. There was no one here talking about the dangers of mold by not taking adequate measures to clean and gut our homes. Some people wiped down their floors and walls and called it a day. What kinds of health consequences will we see in our elderly and youth as a result?

The very next day after the storm, there was a fire two doors down. The day after that, there was a gas leak next door. What I mean to say is that, there were health and safety risks that still continue to exist long after the storm has abated because we did not have people on the ground with us to guide us in dealing with the catastrophic impact this storm left on our homes. This is not New York's first devastating storm. We have to think about adequate and immediate assistance in the wake of climate disasters, building out and investing in preventative infrastructures

In August 2007, our block was impacted by a storm. We had three feet of sewage backup then. At that time we learned that the city's sewage drainage pipes had not been cleaned and maintained in our neighborhood for nearly 20 years. Even then, this devastation did not prompt the cleaning and maintenance of the city's sewage drainage system in our neighborhood. My elderly neighbor told me he had experienced a similar sewage backup issue prior to my family

moving into the neighborhood as well. We have evidence that our neighborhood has been impacted numerous times by storms through toxic backup.

I cannot accept the neglect of our neighborhood, which I see as just another facet of environmental racism. We cannot live like this and accept that a third of our homes is uninhabitable. People have died and will continue to die unless we take action. This is what I am proposing:

- **The city's sewage drain pipes are not being maintained and cleaned regularly.** We need regular maintenance in our neighborhoods because of how vulnerable we are.
- **We need ways to safely re-route sewage water in low-lying neighborhoods.** There are blocks in our neighborhood that are extremely low-lying (I live at the base of a hill, and the entry to our basement/garage is at the end of a declining driveway. Our sewer grate is at the very bottom of this decline in front of our garage and basement entry ways)..
- **We need support with building flood-safe infrastructures in our homes, now, at this critical moment of rebuilding.** We want an inspector out here to investigate existing structures of our homes - our sump pumps, sewer grates, entryways and exits and provide support towards preventative infrastructures, especially since we are all in the process of rebuilding right now.
- **Disaster services should be audited.** There has been much reporting of financial assistance provided to impacted community members. *See Ashley Wong. "More Relief Is on the Way for New Yorkers Recovering From Ida." New York Times. Sep. 8, 2021.* I called Red Cross twice: on September 2, 2021, and again on September 8, 2021. Both times I was told definitively and unambiguously that Red Cross was unable to provide any financial assistance, and that I should contact FEMA. Red Cross did not ask me any questions to assess my situation or screen for qualification, they simply told me they had no aid to provide despite Mayor de Blasio's assertion that they would be providing \$500 debit cards. *Id.* FEMA has reported grants of up to \$35,000, but of my neighbors who have received grants thus far, all of their grant amounts are under \$5000. This has caused a lot of confusion, and reluctance towards taking necessary remediation efforts of our homes because most people don't have tens of thousands of dollars to deal with an unexpected disaster. Most people here don't have flood insurance. This is an enormous financial catastrophe at a time where many people were already struggling.
- **We need to reevaluate immediate on the ground assistance in the wake of environmental disasters.** Don't ask people to travel to distant disaster centers for long term resource assistance. Have people on the ground to help and provide information in multiple languages so everyone can understand what they need to do and how they can get the help they need.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony.

Sincerely,

Deluwara Ahmed