

Joseph L. Smith
Chairman, Board of Commissioners
Janet Abrahams
Executive Director



MEMORANDUM

To: The Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
c/o Natawna Austin, Executive Secretary

From: Janet Abrahams, Executive Director, Housing Authority of Baltimore City

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "for Janet Abrahams".

Date: July 29, 2019

Re: City Council Bill 19-0156R, Informational Hearing – Water Outages

The Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) has reviewed City Council Bill 18-0308, for the purpose of inviting representatives from the Department of Public Works, Department of Housing and Community Development, Housing Authority of Baltimore City, Baltimore City Public School System, Department of Recreation and Parks, and the Baltimore City Health Department to discuss protocols in place for and best practices to provide assistance to Baltimore City residents in the event they lose access to water.

HABC recognizes that Baltimore City has an aging water and wastewater infrastructure and that the city has suffered numerous severe water main breaks in recent years. HABC agrees that any event that causes city residents to go without water must be handled with the utmost seriousness. Through its Public Housing and Housing Choice Voucher programs, HABC serves over 19,000 low-income households in Baltimore City, including some of the city’s most vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, children, veterans and the chronically homeless. HABC’s current public housing inventory consists of 7,576 units in 13 HABC-owned developments as well as other scattered sites throughout the city.

Given the agency’s position as the city’s largest provider of affordable housing, HABC understands the importance of having protocols in place to address emergencies, such as the recent water main break that affected residents at the Poe Homes public housing development. In fact, HABC has undergone an Emergency Preparedness and Response planning process, which helped to inform HABC’s response to the urgent situation at Poe and has provided the agency with protocols and best practices for handling other emergencies. However, HABC has limited ability to address infrastructure issues that are not within its property or control and must rely on coordinated efforts with City agencies to ensure that appropriate preventative measures are in place and that all necessary actions are taken to resolve emergency situations.

HABC's Response to the Poe Homes Water Outage

When HABC was first informed of the water outage at Poe Homes on Sunday, June 16, 2019, it monitored the situation with Edgewood Property Management (the company that managed Poe Homes until June 30, 2019) and the Department of Public Works (DPW) and provided water for distribution to residents at the site. In the days that followed, a series of failures in water mains and valves in the area resulted in residents at Poe being left with no or reduced water supply in their homes. It took over one week to adequately restore the water at Poe, and as the situation escalated, HABC took the following measures:

- From the time HABC first received notification of the outage, staff from HABC's Housing Operations and Office of Resident Services were consistently present at the site. When water had still not been restored after several days, HABC's Executive Director and representatives from the Executive Director's office and HABC's Communications department were present at the site each day from Friday June 21st through Tuesday June 26th starting as early as 7:00 a.m. leaving as late as 2:00 a.m. to address resident concerns, manage emergency operations and provide other assistance.
- HABC's internal engineers were present to assess plumbing and water flow problems. HABC also brought in additional maintenance staff from its other public housing sites as well as three contractors (two plumbing, one quality assurance) to assist.
- HABC provided consistent communication and outreach to residents. HABC's Office of Resident Services went door to door to conduct wellness checks on vulnerable residents. HABC also held meetings in the community room to provide regular updates to residents. In addition, a 24-hour emergency telephone line was available for residents to report any problems or concerns.
- HABC maintained contact with DPW for progress updates and provided hourly and/or daily status reports to the Mayor's Office, City Council members, HABC's Board of Commissioners and senior staff.
- HABC coordinated efforts with the Mayor's Office, the University of Maryland Baltimore and other nonprofit groups to provide residents with food, water, personal grooming items, cleaning supplies and mobile shower and laundry facilities
- HABC provided residents with cases of bottled water for drinking and gallon jugs for washing and five-gallon buckets for bathing and flushing toilets
- HABC's maintenance staff and contractors worked double shifts to remove and replace recently installed low-flow toilets at the site when it was speculated that low water pressure on the site was keeping toilets from operating. In total, 280 toilets were removed, and 280 new toilets were installed over the course of three days.

After water was adequately restored to the site, HABC continued to monitor water flow, pressure and quality at Poe Homes.

HABC's Emergency Preparedness Plan

As stated above, HABC has been in the process of developing an emergency response and preparedness plan that will define the actions to be taken by HABC in a variety of critical situations, including a large-

scale emergency or disaster. After the water outage, consultants from the University of Maryland Center for Health and Homeland Security, who worked with HABC to develop the plan, conducted an after-action briefing with representatives from all HABC departments and staff that assisted at Poe Homes. Observations from this debriefing, as well as successful strategies and partnerships that HABC used in response to the outage at Poe, have been incorporated into the draft plan, which has been delivered to HABC for review.

When finalized, HABC's Emergency Response and Preparedness Plan will detail activities related to mitigation, preparation, response and recovery operations for any type of major emergency or disaster. Considerations for the most common hazards that HABC faces, including long term/widespread utility failure, in addition to development-specific issues are attached as Appendices to the plan. In the coming months, HABC staff will participate in "table-top" exercises designed to practice responding to various levels of emergencies. Coordination with City and State agencies, such as the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management, and other partners will be a critical part in implementation of the plan and HABC's response to any loss of service to its properties throughout the city.

JA:jd

cc: Michael Huber, City Council President's Office
Jeffrey Amoros, Mayor's Office of Government Relations