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Back Home, Back to Work: Eradicating Sandy Mold Infestation Once and For All

Abstract

A joint Initiative of Laborers Local 78, the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, Make the Road NY, New York Communities for Change, Queens Congregations United for Action, ALIGN, the Mutual Housing Association of New York (MHANY), PICO National Network and other members of the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding.

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Comments

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Back Home, Back to Work:

ERADICATING SANDY MOLD INFESTATION ONCE AND FOR ALL

– a joint Initiative of Laborers Local 78, the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, Make the Road NY, New York Communities for Change, Queens Congregations United for Action, ALIGN, the Mutual Housing Association of New York (MHANY), PICO National Network and other members of the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding

The Need

Superstorm Sandy devastated New York City's buildings and its devastation is still immediately visible when visiting impact communities. When Mayor Bloomberg announced the Rapid Repairs program, he estimated that between 70,000 and 80,000 homes had suffered water damage.¹

Those homes damaged by floodwaters that have not been adequately repaired now face an urgent and escalating health crisis: mold infestation. Nearly three months after Sandy, thousands of residents in the areas most impacted by the Superstorm remain unable return home or to their businesses because of the health risks posed by mold, or live in mold-infested homes, putting themselves and their families at risk of adverse health impacts.

A study released this January showed that 37% of surveyed residents in the Rockaways still have mold in their homes.² If the Rockaways are an indication of the extent of the current mold problem, there could be over 30,000 mold contaminated homes in New York City³.

Assuming an average cost of \$17,500 per home for mold assessment and remediation, the City of New York would need at least \$525 million to fully fund an effective mold remediation program.⁴

The only good news is that a real investment in systematic mold remediation would also create thousands of jobs for local residents in the hardest hit New York communities, where the economic devastation brought by Sandy has been brutal. Proper mold removal could directly and indirectly create

¹ NY1, City Organizes Day Of Service To Help Sandy Recover, at http://www.ny1.com/content/top_stories/172118/city-organizes-day-of-service-to-help-sandy-recovery

² Forgotten: How the City Has Failed Sandy Victims in The Rockaways, New York Communities for Change, at <http://bit.ly/NYCCMold>

³ New York City's Rapid Repairs program, which is now closed to new applicants, did not specifically cover mold remediation and in any event has reached only 12,247 homes, with work continuing in an additional 1,893 buildings. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/24/nyregion/residents-in-storm-damaged-homes-struggle-to-keep-out-of-the-cold.html?_r=0&hp=&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1359025798-dGI9zyl7a/mMqWAo9DPvOg&gwh=9AE705D4CB66880C94546B016B029596

⁴ Estimates from mold remediation contractors: costs generally vary between \$10,000 and \$25,000 per home.

more than 9,000 good-paying jobs.⁵ There are currently 350,000 unemployed workers in New York City, and anything that can be done to put those most impacted by Sandy back to work is essential for their families and their communities.⁶

The Human and Financial Costs of Mold

Mold is considered a biological hazard.⁷ Breathing or touching mold can cause health problems. Simply killing mold is insufficient, as even dead mold killed with bleach can pose a health risk. The following health problems can result from exposure:

- **Poisoning and Infectious Disease:** Some molds may cause serious illness or infection. People with compromised immune systems are most at risk.⁸
- **Allergy:** asthma, itchy watery eyes, congestion, cough, wheezing, tightness in chest, trouble breathing.
- **Irritation:** burning eyes, congestion, cough, post-nasal drip.

The City of New York has failed to address the issue or to request funds from FEMA or the state for high-quality mold remediation. Dangerous work is being carried out by volunteers and workers with little training or protections, putting workers at risk and creating the risk that work done incorrectly will need to be redone and will fail to reduce the exposure of families and small businesses to this hazard.

The risk of doing mold remediation in a haphazard way through privately-hired contractors can be grave:

- **Disastrous health impacts.** Residents of Red Hook, for example, have an asthma rate of 26.4%, five times higher than other New Yorkers.⁹ Those with pre-existing asthma are more susceptible to airborne toxins such as mold and as a result are more at risk for increased healthcare costs and lost wages.
- **Ever increasing cost of repair:** As mold spreads due to inaction or poor workmanship, demolition of larger and larger sections a home becomes necessary, including the removal of both porous and even semi-porous materials, such as concrete.¹⁰

⁵ Job Creation per \$1 Million Investment, Heidi Garrett-Peltier and Robert Pollin, University of Massachusetts Political Economy and Research Institute, at http://adpartners.org/tables/Job_Creation_for_Investment_-_Garrett-Peltier.pdf

⁶ New York Department of Labor, Employed, Unemployed, and Rate of Unemployment by Place of Residence, December 2012, at <http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/prtbur.pdf>

⁷ Environmental Protection Agency, Biological Pollutants, at <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/biologic.html>

⁸ New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH), Hurricane Sandy Cleanup Workers Mold Factsheet, www.nycosh.org

⁹ Red Hook Community Health Assessment, at http://www.brooklyncb6.org/_attachments/2009-05-22%20RHI%20Red%20Hook%20Houses%20Health%20Assessment.pdf, page 1

¹⁰ Guidelines on Assessment and Remediation of Fungi in Indoor Environments, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/epi/moldrpt1.shtml>

- **Doubling the cost:** Work done poorly the first time, by an untrained or unscrupulous contractor who fails to remediate the mold properly, must be done again. While at first it might be appealing to use a cheap contractor, mold remediation must be done thoroughly and correctly, or it will have to be redone, costing the government and homeowners twice.
- **Workers' lives in jeopardy:** Workers removing mold without respirators, or safety equipment and training, can have both short- and long-term health impacts.
- **Unscrupulous contractors:** Contractors without adequate training on mold remediation can leave behind invisible but growing mold that will continue to infest the building.
- **Increased cost borne by the poor, young, seniors, and sick:** Those who are most vulnerable in our society bear the brunt of the cost of mold infestation. The poor have few options to live elsewhere, and accordingly may stay in homes that are infested by mold in spite of the health dangers. The young, seniors, and sick are more susceptible to health risks posed by mold, yet are also less able to live elsewhere.
- **Intangible costs:** Lost time as homeowners must take time off work to allow inspectors and workers to enter the home, and added stress from sleeping in a mold-infested home.

The Solution – The *Back Home, Back to Work* Initiative

Back Home, Back to Work is an innovative initiative with the capacity to conduct rapid, safe and expert mold remediation at thousands of homes and businesses in the New York region. ***Back Home, Back to Work*** is a joint initiative of Laborers Local 78 and members of the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding – a coalition of community based organizations and faith groups organizing for a fast, equitable and environmentally sustainable reconstruction in Sandy-impacted communities.

Back Home, Back to Work taps into hundreds of qualified environmental remediation contractors and approximately 600 skilled union mold remediation workers who are ready to begin work immediately. The project will also hire additional non-union workers from local communities and Sandy-impacted populations, provide intensive and thorough safety and skills training, and connect them to union jobs during the recovery period.

***Back Home, Back to Work* PARTNERS**

- **Laborers Local 78** – LIUNA Local 78 represents 4,000 asbestos, lead and mold remediation workers in New York City, Long Island and New Jersey.
- Members of the **Alliance for a Just Rebuilding** include ALIGN, Laborers Local 78, Make the Road New York, New York Communities for Change, Mutual Housing Association of NY, PICO National Network and Queens Congregations United for Action.
- **The Mason Tenders District Council Training Fund** provides expert training in safe and professional environmental remediation for members of LIUNA Local 78.

- **Make the Road New York's** workforce development program operates in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and Long Island, providing job training and placement for unemployed and underemployed New Yorkers, especially in many of the areas hardest hit by Sandy. MRNY has already trained nearly 1,000 workers in occupational safety and health during the Sandy response.

COMPONENTS OF THE *Back Home, Back to Work* INITIATIVE

Back Home, Back to Work offers the ability to respond immediately to demands for safe and thorough mold remediation at large scale. The initiative will immediately connect any individual or group of residents or business owners to reliable, cost-effective, and expert mold remediation contractors to handle mold removal safely and quickly to get homeowners and businesses back in their homes and back at work. ***Back Home, Back to Work* is best suited to partner with city and state entities to handle mold remediation in a systematic and cost-effective way that goes block-by-block rather than one house or one business at a time.** The core elements of *Back Home, Back to Work* are the following:

- **COORDINATION** – *Back Home, Back to Work* will connect private or government entities with reliable, expert and cost-effective contractor options and help determine which homes and businesses should be handled as part of the same remediation project.
- **REMEDICATION** - *Back Home, Back to Work* contractors will do safe, thorough mold remediation following NYC Mold Remediation guidelines, and will guarantee all mold removal work so that homeowners, businesses and our taxpayers do NOT have to pay more than once to restore the safety of our Sandy-affected buildings.
- **STAFFING** – *Back Home, Back to Work* will provide a constant a reliable flow of expert, trained mold remediation workers. At least 600 trained, expert union members are available for immediate placement in residential mold removal. Thousands more are immediately available for commercial mold remediation jobs. And the *Back Home, Back to Work* intensive training program has the capacity to prepare thousands more for placement.
- **TRAINING** – The Mason Tenders District Council Training Fund will provide Local 78 members with expert training for safe and professional environmental remediation. Expert workforce training contractors like NYCOSH and Make the Road New York will supplement the training fund's work to respond quickly to increased training need. Intensive mold remediation training offered as part of *Back Home, Back to Work* will include modules on OSHA safety rights and regulations, respirator use, and mold remediation skill building.
- **CREATING LADDERS OF OPPORTUNITY** – *Back Home, Back to Work* will provide intensive training and job placement for hundreds of non-union workers, prioritizing the hiring and placement of local workers from Sandy-impacted communities and other vulnerable local groups. Workers will receive temporary union membership for the life of the program, and will access union benefits while developing expert skills and dramatically increasing their long-term employability.

Key Recommendations for New York City

In order for *Back Home, Back to Work* to adequately meet the city's need for immediate mold remediation, the city must NOT leave mold remediation up to each individual household or business.

- **Mayor Bloomberg should immediately request adequate federal and state monies** to fund a dedicated city initiative to handle mold remediation. Private money is insufficient to address mold adequately and efficiently.¹¹
- **The City should designate the agency best positioned to administer a large scale program** of this type, and a **proven track record of working with community and labor partners**, and provide that agency with a **firm directive and adequate resources** to make the program efficient and effective.
- The City should request that the program administrator **divide the areas affected by Sandy into priority areas**, based on areas with the highest density of water damaged homes and the lowest median income. The City should **contract with reputable mold assessment companies to conduct proactive outreach to affected homes, visual inspection and sampling or other testing as necessary**. This assessment cannot be done cost-effectively if arranged privately home-by-home or business-by-business. City coordination and resources will avoid waste and avoid burdening home- and business-owners with expensive and often unnecessary "sampling" as part of the assessment process.
- **The City should require a daily report on assessments** in order to promptly arrange for appropriate remediation.
- **Back Home, Back to Work can then serve as a go-to resource** to help the city meet the vast need for rapid, complete, and safe mold remediation.

Contact

Abraham Hernandez, LIUNA Local 78	zeal777liuna@yahoo.com	(347) 852-5069
Deborah Axt, Make the Road New York	Deborah.Axt@maketheroadny.org	(347) 432-6254
Peter Nagy, NY Communities for Change	pnagy@nycommunities.org	(516) 983-1041
Joseph McKellar, Queens Congregations United for Action	joseph@qcua.org	(718) 440-2992

¹¹ For example, the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City has provided important funds for Sandy relief, but they total \$30 million to date, far short of the projected need.