

When the Lights Go Out in New York City...

**A Survey of New York City Senior Centers by the Office
of the Public Advocate**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This past summer, New York and many other cities in our region experienced a power failure or blackout that affected eight million residents in New York City alone. Apart from its devastating economic impact, power failures are distressing experiences for people of all ages, but they are especially trying for vulnerable seniors. This underscores the need for elderly service providers, like senior centers, to be readily prepared to mitigate problems that can arise from power failures and other emergencies. Senior centers in New York City provide a variety of services ranging from congregate and home delivered meals, case assistance, to health and educational services. For many of the city's elderly, these are places where they establish a network of social support, maintain friendships, and participate in group activities. For these reasons, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey during the month of October to determine senior center preparedness in times of power failures, specifically to determine senior center access to emergency back up generators.

FINDINGS

- 93 percent of the centers surveyed did not have an emergency back-up generator located within their center
- 87 percent of all senior centers surveyed lacked any access to emergency back-up generators
- More than half of the senior centers surveyed experienced difficulties resulting from the loss of power
- Bronx Senior Centers reported having the least access to emergency back-up generators
- Brooklyn Senior Centers reported facing the most problems related to the blackout

RECOMMENDATIONS

- DFTA and NYCHA should develop emergency evacuation plans for senior centers
- Provision of emergency back-up generators at senior centers
- Make emergency supplies available at senior centers
- Regular maintenance of emergency back-up generators at senior centers

Introduction

For many older New Yorkers, senior centers provide an opportunity to establish a network of social support, maintain friendships, and participate in group activities. According to the Mayor's Management Report of Fiscal Year 2003, almost two-thirds of New York City's 336 Department for the Aging (DFTA) administered centers are operating above 90 percent capacity. Similarly, 90 percent of the 40 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) administered senior centers are running at 100 percent capacity.¹ Clearly, the City's senior centers are heavily utilized and serve as places where seniors congregate, and will need to be prepared in the event of disasters, both natural and manmade.²

In fact, New York and many other cities in our region experienced a power failure or blackout this past summer. The blackout of August 2003 affected eight million residents in New York City alone. The economic loss to the City as a result of the blackout is estimated at between 700 million and \$1 billion.³ Apart from its devastating economic impact, power failures are distressing experiences for people of all ages, but they are especially trying for vulnerable seniors. For example, many elderly people suffer from poor vision, poor hearing, diminished mobility, dementia, and many other impediments to their mental and physical health. In times of power failures and other similar emergencies, these impediments may cause discomfort at best and even death at worst. Hence it is imperative that service providers are equipped with emergency preparedness measures to help prevent dangerous situations that may arise as a result of a power failure. One such measure would be to ensure senior center access to emergency back-up generators that can maintain some portion of the electric power load. These emergency generators could be used to run elevators in buildings, provide lighting, ensure the safety of facilities, provide heating or cooling, and prevent food spoilage

Emergency preparedness for seniors is an important issue that is of great concern to the Public Advocate's Office. Earlier this year, the Public Advocate's Office in conjunction with the AARP published *Being Prepared-Reminders and Tips for New York City Seniors*, a pamphlet to prepare New York City seniors for various disaster situations. Following up on the issue of senior center preparedness for seniors, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey of 75 senior centers throughout the five boroughs of New York City, to determine senior center access to emergency back-up generator equipment in times of power failures.

¹ The Mayor's Management Report, Fiscal 2003. Available at http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/pdf/2003_mmr/0903_mmr.pdf

² Ibid.

³ New York City Emergency Response Task Force, "Enhancing New York City's Emergency Preparedness," October 2003.

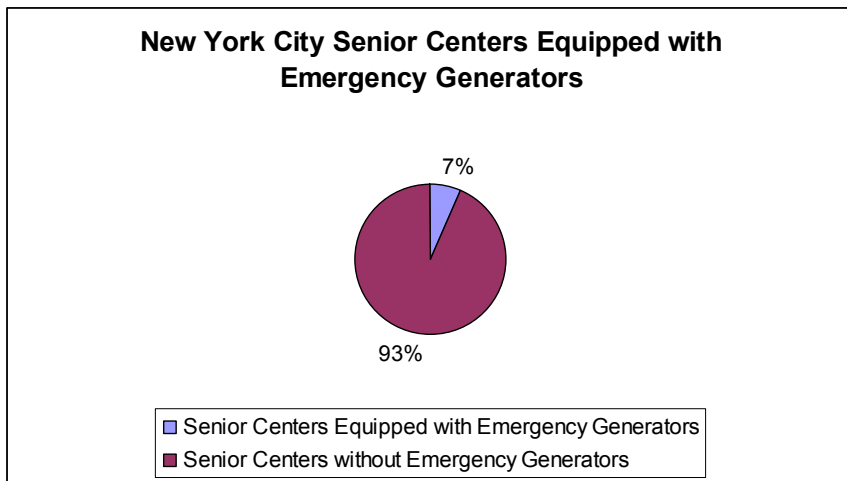
Methodology

This is a random telephone survey of 75 senior centers across the five boroughs of New York City, 15 in each borough. 56 of the centers surveyed were operated by the New York City Department for the Aging, while the remaining 19 are run by the New York City Housing Authority. Each center was called and asked about their access to emergency back-up generators in case of power failure, either within the center itself or within the building where the center is located. Centers were also queried on whether they faced problems during this past blackout. The survey was conducted from October 14th to 28th.

Findings

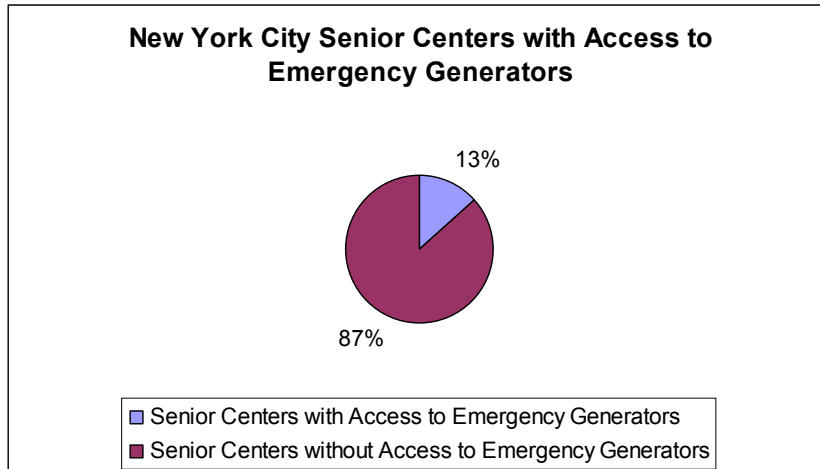
87 percent of all senior centers surveyed lacked access to emergency back-up generators

- 70 (93 percent) of the centers surveyed did not have an emergency back-up generator located within their centers. Only five (seven percent) of the surveyed sites reported having a back-up generator.



- Although a clear majority of the centers did not have back-up generators located within their own centers, some had access to emergency back-up generators located elsewhere in the building.⁴ Of the 75 centers we surveyed, 65 (87 percent) of the centers lacked access to any back-up generator, whether located within their own center or on the premises.

⁴ A total of nine centers were located in buildings that had back-up generators located elsewhere on the premises. However, four of these nine centers already had access to a generator of their own.



- 46 (86.7 percent) of the 53 DFTA operated centers and 19 (86.3 percent) of the 22 NYCHA operated centers surveyed lacked access to any back-up generator. The lack of access to backup power in NYCHA centers is especially troubling because many of the elderly center patrons live in the same buildings and lack of power impede the building’s ability to run elevators to enable wheelchair-bound seniors to exit the building in a reasonable amount of time, if necessary.

More than half of the senior centers surveyed experienced difficulties resulting from loss of power

Based on our survey findings, more than half of the senior centers experienced problems resulting from blackouts and loss of power.

- 41 (55 percent) of the 75 centers surveyed citywide experienced problems due to the blackout of 2003.
- 34 (45 percent) of the 75 centers surveyed citywide did not report having any problems as a result of the blackout.

There were several recurring problems senior centers faced as a result of the blackout. The problems reported include:

- Centers that provided congregate and/or home delivered meals had large amounts of their food supply spoil. 22 of the 41 centers with problems indicated they suffered food spoilage and were unable to open their centers the next day and serve meals— meals their elderly patrons relied on. The food spoilage also put a pinch on many center budgets, causing their funding agencies to reimburse the centers for these expenses.
- Three of the centers surveyed, all operated by NYCHA, Palmetto Gardens and Langston Hughes Senior Center located in Brooklyn and Lehman Senior Center in Manhattan, reported that seniors were forced to stay overnight at the center due to their inability to find their way home safely. Both Langston Hughes and Lehman Senior Centers lacked access to any generator, while the generator on the premises at Palmetto Gardens was not working. As a result, center staff was forced to take on the overwhelming responsibility of supervising the seniors, and making sure that they were not injured in the dark.

- Thirteen other centers experienced food spoilage and opened with diminished capacity and function.

Senior Centers surveyed in the Bronx reported having the least access to emergency generators

- On a borough specific level, senior centers surveyed in the Bronx reported having the least access to emergency back-up generators. Of the 15 centers surveyed in the Bronx, none reported having a back-up generator within their centers. Only one had access to a back-up generator located elsewhere in the building.
- Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens follow, with only two of the 15 centers surveyed in each borough having access to back-up generators, either inside their centers or elsewhere in their buildings.
- Senior centers in Staten Island fared the best, with three of the 15 centers surveyed in the borough equipped with back-up generators. All of these three centers also had access to additional back-up generators on their premises.

Brooklyn Senior Centers reported facing the most problems related to the blackout

In regards to reporting problems correlated to the August blackout, the distribution is slightly different.

- The borough of Brooklyn had the most centers with problems related to the blackout, with all fifteen of the centers surveyed in the borough reporting problems.
- The Bronx and Queens follow, with eight of the 15 centers surveyed reporting problems.
- Senior centers surveyed in Manhattan show that seven of the 15 centers reported problems.
- Finally, Staten Island reported the least amount of problems with only three of the 15 centers surveyed reporting problems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many of the City’s elderly rely on senior centers for meals, case assistance, and shelter from the fickle weather. Based on our findings, a clear majority of the senior centers surveyed lacked access to emergency back-up generators and reported facing numerous problems as a result of this. Not only is it imperative for all senior centers to have approved emergency preparedness plans, they should also be equipped with back-up generators for emergency situations. The provision of back-up generators at senior centers would ensure a safe and convenient haven for seniors during power failures of all kinds. To prepare senior centers in cases of emergencies and ensure the safety of our seniors and the readiness of their service providers, the Public Advocate strongly recommends the following:

DFTA and NYCHA should develop emergency evacuation plans

- Both DFTA and NYCHA should develop a single, comprehensive plan of action for all senior centers in the event of an emergency. The plan should include a detailed set of contact information that tells service providers how and from whom to get up-to-date news and instructions, even when phone lines and cell phones are down, as was the case this past summer. This type of cooperative planning on the part of City agencies and service providers will ensure that safe havens for seniors are truly able to protect them within their walls, or safely get them out, if necessary.

Provision of emergency back-up generators at senior centers

- The New York City Department for the Aging and the New York City Housing Authority must provide the City's senior centers with sufficient funding to equip these centers with emergency back-up generators. Based on our research, the average cost for an emergency back-up generator is \$3,635.⁵ The provision of such a generator in all of the City's senior centers is estimated to cost approximately \$1.35 million.⁶
- It is especially important that NYCHA centers or the buildings they are located in have access to back-up power, since they are not merely places where the elderly visit, but reside in as well. DFTA should also routinely incorporate provisions in their contracts that require vendors to have emergency preparedness plans, including emergency back-up generators.

Make emergency supplies available at senior centers

- Based on the findings from our survey, senior center clients at three of the centers we surveyed were forced to remain overnight on-site. Senior centers must develop a plan in the event of emergency situations like this. This plan should include maintaining adequate supplies, especially non-perishable food; training staff, volunteers, and clients in First Aid; and securing a means of communication that does not depend solely on phone service.

Regular maintenance of emergency back-up generators at senior centers

- In centers that do have back-up generators, both agencies should conduct regular inspections to ensure that they function properly.

⁵ Source: <http://www.generatorjoe.net/>. Generator specifications: GENERAC Home Standby Series 15 Kw. Model #004675.

⁶ This is an average estimate for 371 senior centers. It is important to note that different centers will vary in their need for electrical capacity.

Appendix A.

New York City Senior Centers and Their Access to Emergency Generators

Borough	Centers	Centers equipped with generators	Center with access to a generator in their building	Problems resulting from 2003 blackout
Bronx	Mt. Carmel (DFTA)	No	No	None
Bronx	Douglas Leon Senior Center (DFTA)	No	No	None
Bronx	Heights center (DFTA)	No	No	No running water. Unable to open the next day.
Bronx	Mechler Hall Senior Center (DFTA)	No	No	None
Bronx	Fort Independence (DFTA)	No	No	None
Bronx	Highbridge Gardens (NYCHA)	No	No	Too dark for the seniors to see.
Bronx	Morrisania Air Rights (NYCHA)	No	No	None
Bronx	Pss Davidson Senior Center (DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage. Difficulties closing and opening the center.
Bronx	Rain Baily Senior Center (DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage Difficulties opening the day after the blackout.
Bronx	Riverdale Senior Center (DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout.
Bronx	Throgs Neck Senior Center (DFTA)	No	No	None
Bronx	Tremont Community Senior Center (DFTA)	No	Yes	None
Bronx	Zerega Golden Age (DFTA)	No	No	Severe food spoilage.
Bronx	SBCC For Seniors	No	No	Severe food

	(DFTA)			spoilage.
Bronx	Pelham Parkway (DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage
Brooklyn	Brevoort Senior Center(NYCHA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Brownsville Senior Center(NYCHA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Bushwick/Hylan Senior center(NYCHA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Cypress Hills S.C. (NYCHA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Independence Towers(NYCHA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Langston Hughes(NYCHA)	No	No	Food spoilage. Hard to get seniors home. Many stayed overnight.
Brooklyn	Palmetto Gardens(NYCHA)	No	Yes, but not functioning	Staff and seniors stayed over night.
Brooklyn	Seth Low(NYCHA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Stuyvesant Gardens(NYCHA)	Yes	No	Unable to open the day

				following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Atlantic(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Pink(NYCHA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Los Sures(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Decatur Grant Square(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Eileen Dugan(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Brooklyn	Abe Stark(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Manhattan	60 Plus Program(DFTA)	No	No	None
Manhattan	Canaan Salem(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout.
Manhattan	Citizens Care(DFTA)	No	No	None
Manhattan	City Hall(DFTA)	yes	yes	None
Manhattan	Community	No	No	None

	Lounge(DFTA)			
Manhattan	Corsi House(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open the day following the blackout. Severe food spoilage.
Manhattan	Drew Hamilton(DFTA)	No	No	None
Manhattan	East River(DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage.
Manhattan	Ennis Francis(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to open due to lack of food.
Manhattan	Douglas(NYCHA)	No	No	Unprepared to supply adequate food and shelter for misplaced seniors.
Manhattan	Lehman (NYCHA)	No	No	Stranded patrons
Manhattan	Lincoln (NYCHA)	No	yes	None
Manhattan	Meltzer Towers(NYCHA)	No	No	Food spoilage. Patron hospitalized due to lack of access to oxygen
Manhattan	Rangel(NYCHA)	No	No	None
Manhattan	Robinson(NYCHA)	No	No	None
Queens	Bland (NYCHA)	No	No	None
Queens	International Towers (NYCHA)	No	No	Food spoilage
Queens	Shelton (NYCHA)	No	No	None
Queens	Allen Community (DFTA)	No	Yes	None
Queens	BFFY Bayside (DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage
Queens	BFFY Hillcrest(DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage
Queens	Brooks (DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage
Queens	Corona (DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage
Queens	Elmcor (DFTA)	No	No	None
Queens	Forest Hills S.C (DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage
Queens	Glenridge S.C.	No	No	Food spoilage

	(DFTA)			
Queens	Hammel (DFTA)	No	No	None
Queens	Lefrak (DFTA)	No	Yes	None
Queens	North Flushing (DFTA)	No	No	None
Queens	Pomonok (DFTA)	No	No	Food spoilage
Staten Island	New Lane (NYCHA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	Cassidy Coles(DFTA)	No	No	Unable to assist all patrons around the facility.
Staten Island	CYO Senior Guild(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	Forever Young(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	Mariners Harbor(DFTA)	Yes	Yes	None
Staten Island	New Dorp Friendship Club(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	Staten Island MOW(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	West Brighton(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	The Golden Years(DFTA)	Yes	Yes	None
Staten Island	COJO of Staten Island(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	Mt. Loreto(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	Sea view Hospital & Home(DFTA)	Yes	Yes	None
Staten Island	Project Share(DFTA)	No	No	None
Staten Island	South Beach(DFTA)	No	No	Severe food spoilage
Staten Island	Berry Houses Friendship Club(DFTA)	No	No	Problems opening the day following the blackout

Appendix B. The Survey Instrument.

1. “Hi, my name is ----- . I am calling from the Public Advocate’s Office. Our office believes that senior centers should be well prepared in cases of emergencies. We are trying to find out what your emergency needs are and how we can be helpful.
2. Specifically, we are calling to find out whether your senior center has a back-up generator.
3. If your center does not have a back-up generator, what about the building where your center is located in?
4. Has the center faced difficulties in the past, due to the lack of a back-up generator either at your center or in the building? What were these difficulties?
5. Is your center administered by the Department for the Aging (DFTA) or by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)?