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On the ground – and at the table

January 30th, 2020

### **Testimony: Oversight - Seven Years Later, Update on the Expenditure and Reimbursement of Superstorm Sandy Federal Funding**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Priya Mulgaonkar, and I'm the Resiliency Planner at the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance. Founded in 1991, NYC-EJA is a city-wide membership network linking 11 grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their fight for environmental justice.

In 2012, Superstorm Sandy devastated our city, sounding the alarm that the climate crisis is here. Sandy's impacts were not equally felt, with low-income communities, communities of color, and public housing residents in coastal communities from Red Hook to the Rockaways facing the heaviest impacts and the slowest recovery.

Massive investments in coastal resiliency are essential to confronting the risks of the climate crisis. But the allocation of the Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) follows similar patterns of racial and economic inequality as Superstorm Sandy. As of December 31, 2019, of the nearly \$4.2 billion in CDBG-DR Sandy Recovery funds available to the City of New York, only about 11% has been allocated to coastal resiliency.<sup>1</sup> Within this sliver of the pie, a whopping 70% has been allocated just for the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project, which will protect Wall Street and parts of Lower Manhattan. This \$338 million in federal dollars – which is more than was allocated for the entirety of NYCHA housing recovery – has been joined by an additional \$500 million from the City Budget for four capital projects to reinforce Lower Manhattan's coastal areas and provide interim flood protections for Southstreet Seaport and parts of the Financial District.

While Lower Manhattan faces a surge of investment, the handful of communities in South Brooklyn, Hunts Point, and Staten Island named in the CDBG-DR budget will split the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/content/sandytracker/pages/hud-cdbg-dr>

remaining 30% of federal coastal resiliency funds. Communities like Far Rockaway and Red Hook, where a significant portion of NYCHA housing is situated in the floodplain, are not named in the federal coastal resiliency budget allocation. Though Red Hook was initially promised \$200 million for coastal resilience through a combination of FEMA Hazard Mitigation Funding and City and State funding, that number has dropped to \$100 million. And the vulnerable Hunts Point Peninsula, an EJ and industrial waterfront community that hosts one of the nation's largest food distribution centers received only \$45 million for an energy resiliency project, but nothing for coastal protection.

The current allocation of coastal resiliency funding does not reflect the dire vulnerability of New York's industrial, working-class waterfront neighborhoods. A lot of national attention has been directed toward shielding lower Manhattan from the next climate emergency. Meanwhile, the most impacted communities, some of which are still recovering and waiting to return to their homes, are seeing a slower response and much more modest investments.

In 2010, NYC-EJA launched the Waterfront Justice Project, New York City's first citywide community resiliency campaign that seeks to reduce potential toxic exposures and public health risks associated with climate change and storm surge in the City's industrial waterfront. We envision a robust, working industrial waterfront in our Significant Maritime and Industrial Areas (SMIAs) that can support a regenerative, green economy while providing good, blue-color jobs. Our research has shown that the SMIA's are all in storm surge zones, and that the City of New York had not analyzed the cumulative contamination exposure risks associated with clusters of heavy industrial use. Facilities handling hazardous substances or toxic chemicals in these SMIA's represent a threat to these EJ communities in the event of a hurricane storm surge, and warrants significant investment in coastal resiliency. We need to ensure the retention and vitality of these industrial communities without putting residents at risk of toxic exposure.

We also need to see more concerted investment in ecologically-grounded coastal resiliency measures. Low-lying areas like the Rockaways can be protected using techniques like living shorelines, which work with the existing wetlands, beachheads and water habitats to prevent erosion and reduce wave impacts. For more industrial areas, we can elevate critical existing infrastructure and incorporate new green space, permeable surfaces, and green infrastructure to mitigate flooding.

Environmental Justice communities cannot wait for another Sandy before we act on coastal resiliency. Thank you for calling attention to the need for oversight on the disbursement of post-disaster funds.