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Out of order: Residents of Pine Hill Towers are often stranded due to spotty elevator service

BY JASON LEVY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

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WATERBURY — Susan Williams, 61, keeps a basket tied to a 150-foot long, orange extension cord with a knot in the middle near her balcony on the sixth floor of Pine Hill Towers.

With the help of her downstairs neighbor, Kathleen Chatfield, 68, the two carefully lower the basket to the ground floor as it passes the balconies of other residents. The apartment building, at the corner of Pine Street and Hillside Avenue, stands nine stories high.

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Mark of Prospect, center, exits the elevator as residences look to enter at Pine Hill Towers on Friday. The elevator recently has not been working forcing tenants to use the stairs. Bill Shettle Republican-American



Yashira Santiago, a tenant at the Pine Hill Towers uses the stairs to walk up to her apartment on Friday. Yashira was using the stairs since the elevator wasn't working when she tried to use it. The elevator recently has not been working forcing tenants to use the stairs. Bill Shettle Republican-American



Tenants wait and exit the working elevator at Pine Hill Towers on Friday. The elevator recently has not been working forcing tenants to use the stairs. Bill Shettle Republican-American

When Chatfield's basket hits the ground, someone, often the Meals on Wheels delivery man, sometimes a caretaker or neighbor, will fill the basket with milk and other groceries, takeout, or medicine.

When the basket is ready, the two women hoist the basket, via the extension cord, back to her balcony.

"I am just sick and tired of being sick and tired of the elevator. My nurse is ready to cry. She hates it, but she has to give me my meds." Susan Williams said.

The practice has become routine for residents of the upper floors of Pine Hill Towers, especially for Williams, who has rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia, restless leg syndrome, osteoporosis and arthritis in all her joints. Her ailments make it difficult for her to get around, even more so because the building's two elevators are often out of service, which

she says can last for extended periods of time. When the elevators do work, they typically break down again quickly.

Local and state health and safety officials say the situation demands attention, but safety codes intended to protect the public don't automatically mandate official intervention.

"I am just sick and tired of being sick and tired of the elevator," Williams said. "My nurse is ready to cry. She hates it, but she has to give me my meds. I don't know how to help them. I want to give everybody baskets and 150-foot extension cords."

Her only other option is to walk up and down five stories of stairs, two flights and a landing between each floor.



The door to the fifth floor of Pine Hill Towers is propped open to allow people to access the floor. The doors are locked from outside the stairwell. Jason Levy Republican-American

Solomon recalled being in tears after seeing a woman in her 80s sitting on one of the stairs because she was tired from walking. Williams' former aide, Thelma Solomon, came to her apartment multiple times during the week, said the elevators have not worked approximately 20 times during the past three months. She said the elevators were recently out of service on May 11, and when they were working again on May 19, they were out of service again on May 23.

"Imagine an elderly lady with a mask on, trying to catch her breath sitting there and breathing hard," she said. "That is a sad sight to see."

Pine Hill Towers, with addresses listed as 117 Pine St. and 120 Hillside Avenue in the Hillside neighborhood, was built in 1966 and formerly known as Carlton Towers. It has 80 apartments, according to property records.

The building has changed ownership numerous times, most recently in 2018 when SBM Pine Hill took ownership of the building after New York Community Bank foreclosed on the previous owner, Yeshiva Gedolah, which used two floors on the building as student dorms. Records list Abraham Gottesman and Michael Fried as the principals of SBM Pine Hill.

The most recent records list the taxes as \$90,551.64, which have been paid.

Gottesman said that building management is willing to assist tenants when the elevators are down, including moving tenants to lower floors or having maintenance carry groceries and other heavy items, something Gottesman said he has done himself numerous times.

"In the beginning when I got the building, the elevators would go down together, but that was over a year ago," he said. "I've had maintenance carry stuff up. I have carried stuff up personally. I have my secretary/property manager Jennifer carry stuff up. There is another girl that collects for me. We accommodate whatever it takes to make the tenants happy. And sometimes they are not always happy with the decision."

Waterbury Chief Sanitarian Richard Lee said when the Health Department received complaints of the Pine Hill elevators being broken, the office worked with Hartford Elevator to fix the problems as soon as possible. He said when the elevators were down May 11, they were back up by May 12 and when they went down again May 15, they were back up May 19.

The on-again, off-again issues continued for most of May. The elevator was also not working two days during the first week of June, but property manager Jennifer Morales said that was at the request of Hartford Elevator due to the way the elevators were landing.

Gottesman said that if one elevator is not working, the other one should be, adding that if they are not working, it is usually not for more than a day or two at a time and Hartford Elevator is brought in to make the repairs as soon as possible. When the elevators will be down for maintenance, he said tenants are given 24-48 hours notice.



Pine Hill Towers resident Susan Williams, 63, has a basket tied to an extension cord she uses to lift food and medicine to her sixth-floor apartment when the elevators aren't working. Jason Levy Republican-American

"The amount of time for Hartford Elevator to come out, and most of the time it is a parts issue, because they are older elevators and sometimes they have to get the parts," Gottesman said. "So I pay for overnight shipping. But as far as elevators going down, I have no control over that. The bills that I have to prove that these elevators are being worked on and maintained, they go on and on and on."

During a visit to the building on the morning of May 29, the elevators were not functioning. Solomon pressed the elevator button in the lobby, but neither elevator responded. Management was not on the premises at the time. One of the two elevators was working Friday, and several residents said the elevators have been sporadic over the past couple of weeks.

A note from management was left on an elevator door, explaining that elevator technicians cannot always get to the building right away after the elevator breaks down and they are hopeful a new system can be installed. The note goes on to apologize to the tenants for any inconvenience and thanks them for remaining patient. Lee said he spoke to Morales about securing a contract to modernize the elevator system.

"They are very old and because it is so old, they can't get parts," Lee said. "They have to manufacture parts. It is a situation where they have to really seriously spend the money and fully modernize the two elevators so they won't have to deal with this problem."

Assistant Fire Marshal Christopher Ranaudo said he was last inside the building about a month ago to inspect the new sprinkler system, which Gottesman had installed after assuming ownership of the building. Documents show an inspection by the fire marshal's office on March 21, 2019, that there were no violations.

Attorney David Rosen of David Rosen & Associates in New Haven, who has worked on cases involving housing issues, said landlords have to provide livable quarters including entrances and exits. He said that when it comes to elevators, of course machines do not always function properly, but it is the landlord's responsibility to maintain elevators so that failures are rare and to fix any issues promptly and completely.

"We want the elevators to be modernized. But it is a big project and can't happen overnight." Jennifer Morales, property manager, said.

Morales did not have a timetable for when the elevators would be upgraded, but said it is a problem they are aware of and working to solve.

"We want the elevators to be modernized," she said. "But it is a big project and can't happen overnight."

Williams said she gets subsidies from the housing authority while Chatfield said she pays \$700 a month for rent for a one-bedroom apartment.

Morales said apartments are not marketed to any particular age group or family unit. She declined to comment on price ranges for rent.

Valerie Coleman, who lives on the eighth floor, needed a wheelchair when she moved in four years ago. She had surgery about 18 months ago, causing her to lose about half her weight by her estimate. Her deliveries from Meals on Wheels weigh eight pounds, too heavy for her to lift.

"I have a bad back. I am not supposed to be going up and down all those stairs," Coleman said, "There are days when I just stay inside."

The stairwell doors being locked from the inside makes it difficult for delivery people to drop off essential items for Pine Hill Tower residents, even if they are willing and able to traverse the stairs.

"I can't get into the floors because the doors are locked," said Meals on Wheels driver Danny Ferrari. "I sometimes have to leave meals in the office. There are three meals still in there."

Chatfield noted there have been times when she went grocery shopping with neighbors who live upstairs, but they were unable to bring the food into their apartments.

"We have come home and had to leave the groceries in the car overnight because we had no way of getting them up here," Chatfield said. "I mean serious, monthly shopping. We come home and the elevator is broken. So we've left our food in the car two different times already."

There are resources available to seniors and others in need with housing issues, starting with calling 211 for services available, said Glenn McCade, United Way of Greater Waterbury director of marketing and communications.

Lee noted the city is willing to assist any residents that have difficulties leaving their apartment or going up and down the stairs.

“There was a resident with a disability who couldn’t get their groceries,” Lee said. “The mayor’s office actually asked the police department to assist that particular resident with the groceries. If we are aware of the situation, the city will do whatever to assist the situation.”

The last inspection

State elevator inspector Tim Murphy said the last time the Office of the State Building Inspector was at Pine Hill Towers was in December 2017, when it was known as Carlton Towers and owned by Yeshiva Gedolah, adding that his office has not had any interaction with current owners SBM Pine Hill and have not heard of any issues.

Murphy noted that the Office of State Building Inspector can’t mandate building owners to upgrade elevators, which falls under the purview of the Public Health Department. If an elevator is not working properly and causing a safety concern, it is protocol to turn off the elevators.

“It is our job to keep the public safe, and turning the elevator off is the safest move,” Murphy said. “Our concern is for public safety over accessibility. We are looking to prevent tragedies. We inspect elevators as if our loved ones would use them.”

Murphy said the COVID-19 pandemic and a shortage of inspectors has limited the state elevator inspectors’ ability to stay on schedule. State building inspector Joe Cassidy said Pine Hill Towers is scheduled for an inspection in July.