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For Many Displaced Residents, Frustration Turns to Anger

By BRUCE LAMBERT

As New Yorkers try to return to normalcy, about 8,000 residents still displaced from their apartments near the World Trade Center calamity only wish they could.

Now in their third week as refugees in their own city, they are increasingly frustrated. For some, the mood has turned to anger.

"People are getting very angry with the politicians," said Donald Scherer, a software company executive and president of the newly formed Battery Park City Residents Association. It is meeting at 6 p.m. tonight at Pace University.

The main complaints are the constantly changing rules on access to the so-called frozen zone, a lack of authoritative information and the absence of a timetable for returning home.

"People want to know whether they will be out a few more days or a few weeks or even longer; otherwise it's difficult to plan your life," said Paul Goldstein, the local community board manager. "There's a lot of fluctuation and inconsistency in the boundaries. Some people get in, some don't. Some cars get through but not others. Some days it's easy to get through, some days not. I don't quite get it. It's just a lot of uncertainty."

Mr. Scherer agreed. "The biggest thing is the lack of information — what's happening, when stuff is happening," he said. "Access is a problem. You can't walk around down here. All the sidewalks are closed. The only thing you can do is walk in the middle of the street. You have people competing with dump trucks." To get to his apartment, he said, he has to pass six checkpoints.

Changing rules and the lack of a return timetable are the top complaints.

Although 12,000 more downtown residents have been allowed to reoccupy their homes, their life is not back to normal either. Many face cleanup problems and disruptions including inoperable telephones and scarce transportation. Some say they are too traumatized to return.

The first public protest came Monday when City Councilwoman Kathryn E. Freed invited a few dozen people to help organize efforts. Instead, several hundred showed up, overflowing into two other rooms. Irate residents staged a stormy walkout after shouting down a mayoral aide who they said was giving unsatisfactory answers. "I understood their frustration," Ms. Freed said.

Many downtown residents work at home, using computers or creating art, she said, "so they're not only out of their homes but out of their jobs — it's a double whammy." Those with children are also contending with relocated and overcrowded classes.

"They want to get back to normal, but there's nothing in their lives that's working, and they can't get answers," Ms. Freed said. "You have to go through all kinds of

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hoops to get in your building, the lines move back and forth, they might let you in for half an hour, or they might break your chops. It changes day by day. It's fluky."

Although city inspectors went door to door checking buildings, officials say they have no estimates of how many apartments or people were evacuated. Community leaders estimate that initially about 20,000 residents were barred. Most scattered to hotels or doubled up with friends and relatives, and a few resorted to American Red Cross shelters. Historians say that may have been the city's biggest emergency displacement since the cholera epidemics of the 1800's.

"The city is trying to handle this the best it can," said an aide at the city's emergency command center, who would not give his name. "People have to understand that nothing like this has ever happened to the city before. It's something we're trying to figure out as we go along."

Some residents sympathize with the authorities and say their problems pale next to the losses suffered by others.

"They just chewed up that young man from the mayor's office and spit him out," Linda Secondari-Black, a resident, said of the crowd. "The anger and ferocity was embarrassing. A lot of people have displaced anger, taking it out on the wrong people. There are 7,000 people dead and the guts of the city have been ripped out. We keep reminding ourselves how blessed we are. This is just an inconvenience compared to the enormity of the tragedy."

Ms. Secondari-Black, expecting her first baby any day, had her own troubles. She and her husband were twice turned back when they tried to retrieve baby supplies from their apartment on Murray Street. She called for help from officials all the way up to Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Ms. Freed escorted Mr. Black through the security line. Yesterday the couple heard that their block, and parts of Warren and Chambers Streets, were reopened to residents.

"There were pieces of plane parts on our block — it was part of the crime scene," Ms. Secondari-Black said. "I think they were looking for the black box on our roof. It's also part of the staging area. At times they're moving large vehicles or pieces of debris, and they can't have people walking around."

The city's efforts were praised by president of the local business improvement district, Carl Weisbrod of the Alliance for Downtown New York. "I'm amazed how fast the east side has come back," he said, "but the west side is much more serious." He urged the city to designate an advocate for residents.

Some landlords are also frustrated, like the Lefrak Organization. Of Battery Park City's 9,000 residents, about 5,000 live in Lefrak's Gateway Plaza complex.

Those buildings, near the highly restricted ground zero, remain closed. The eastern face of the Gateway 600 building sustained the most damage of any other residential property in the area, with 500 windows smashed, extensive ash and debris and some fire and water damage.

Although other parts will reopen sooner, the worst-hit section will take "several months," said Richard S. LeFrak, president of the company.

"I want to get back to normal, to restore the buildings and services," he said. "I'm prepared to put an army of workers in, if they let me in."

Mr. LeFrak has even used his father's yacht to transport some workers.

Lefrak sent locksmith crews on Wednesday to start replacing the cylinders on all 1,700 apartment doors so that inspectors could check gas service. But that effort was thwarted, Mr. LeFrak said.

"All my workmen were turned away," he said, "because someone had changed the badges needed for access."

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