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SECTION: Section B; Page 1; Column 2; Metropolitan Desk**LENGTH:** 1445 words**HEADLINE:** Decrepit Station Houses Erode Police Morale, Officers Say**BYLINE:** By KEVIN FLYNN**BODY:**

For years when it rained, police officers in the 50th Precinct station house say, their basement locker room flooded and they had to dress in puddles of water tainted with petroleum from a fuel spill beneath the building.

The fumes were nauseating and headaches were common, officers say, until three months ago, when the city installed a system to vent the vapors and begin removing the contamination. The spill was discovered three years ago.

Whether the new system has solved the problem at the Bronx station house remains a matter of dispute, but few in the Police Department disagree that conditions at many of the city's aged and crowded station houses have become of paramount concern to the officers who work in them.

Across the city, when police officers tally the deprivations of their job, leaking ceilings and peeling paint now occupy a place alongside wage issues, second-guessing by superiors and mounting public criticism as prime sources of slumping morale, officers say.

"We are being told we are the finest," said one 50th Precinct officer. "Is this the way you treat the finest?"

In the Borough Park section of Brooklyn, officers say, the 66th Precinct station house is so cramped that 50 female officers make do with a single toilet, and the boiler room has been pressed into duty as office space.

In nearby Sunset Park, members of the gang and narcotics squads who work in another police building complain that diesel generators outside spew exhaust fumes through windows and vents and cake their desks with soot.

The gabled brick exterior of the Central Park station house, a 130-year-old converted stable, might appear picturesque, but officers say conditions inside are Dickensian. Windows are broken. Walls are crumbling. Floors are patched with plywood. The roof and skylights leak.

"This building was built in 1870 and I think it was last renovated in 1872," one officer said.

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Of the city's 76 station houses, six date from the 19th century and two dozen are more than 50 years old. The average station house is 48 years old, according to a 1998 study by the city comptroller, Alan G. Hevesi. The study said many of the older ones needed to be completely renovated or replaced because their plumbing and electrical systems were decrepit.

In remarks last month, Police Commissioner Howard Safir said the department was confronting the problem by spending an additional \$5 million this year to improve building maintenance. "During my visits to police locations throughout the city," he said at a City Council budget hearing, "I have been very disappointed in their poor physical condition and the message that it sends to our employees who work there on a daily basis and to the members of the public who come to do business or meet with our staff."

The added money will pay for extra painting and cleaning services, the purchase of maintenance vehicles and equipment and the hiring of 54 workers to reduce a backlog of thousands of repair orders. "We will be able to fix things when they break on a timely basis," said Joseph Wuensch, the deputy police commissioner for management and budget.

Officers say the backlog means that it can take months for department plumbers, carpenters and other workers to respond to a request for a repair. Often, they said, officers become so frustrated by long waits that they pitch in themselves to paint a room or lay new flooring. "We are asked to keep the streets clean," said Patrick J. Lynch, president of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association. "We should at least be allowed to work in a clean environment."

In addition to the new maintenance money, the city plans to spend more than \$40 million over the next four building two station houses in Brooklyn and renovating the Central Park station house.

One of the new buildings being designed is a \$19 million replacement for the 66th Precinct station house in Borough Park, a 50-year-old brick building that is among the most crowded stations in the city. The 14 detectives share 4 desks. The lockup for prisoners is a cell 6 feet deep by 3 feet wide, only slightly bigger than an armoire. The wiring is so old, officers say, that it is risky to run the air-conditioning and the computer system at the same time. Last summer, a power loss caused a computer crash that lasted for four days, and officers said they had no access to the criminal histories of the suspects they had arrested.

Police officials said finding the money to upgrade buildings is a perennial problem because of debt limits in the city's capital budget as well as competition for funds from agencies like the Board of Education, many of whose own buildings are dilapidated. In addition, police quarters have become more cramped in the last decade, when the force grew by 25 percent to 40,000 officers.

Whatever the cosmetic shortcomings of the buildings, officials say they do not allow safety hazards to fester. At the 50th Precinct station house in the Bronx, for example, officials said air quality tests taken last fall indicated that the fumes rising from the fuel spill beneath the building were not dangerous. "Our medical division has no evidence that anybody is getting sick from the conditions that we know are up there," said Deputy Chief Thomas P.

Sweeney, who oversees worker safety issues.

But the commander of the precinct wrote a memo last August in which he reported a high incidence of cancer, asthma and miscarriages among people who work at the station house. And officials from several unions that represent officers who work there said many of their members remained concerned.

Lawyers for the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, for example, said that in recent weeks, they interviewed at least 50 officers who work at the station house; more than half reported suffering from nausea, dizziness or headaches. And one of the industrial hygienists who tested the building last year ended up complaining that she felt sick from the fumes, according to an internal memo from a precinct supervisor. "The people are very concerned," one officer said. "They live in fear that they don't know what is going on."

One of the substances causing concern is methyl tertiary butyl ether, a fuel additive shown to cause cancer in animals. City and state officials said tests at the site revealed M.T.B.E. in the ground water beneath the building at a level, 1,400 parts per billion, that was far above the state standard of 10 parts per billion.

Environmental experts said the officers could not be getting sick from the ground water because they were not drinking it. But, they said, the vapors from spilled petroleum products could be dangerous if inhaled in large concentrations over a long time. "The actual risk in the air is dependent on the actual level," said Dr. Philip J. Landrigan, a specialist in occupational medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

City and state officials said additional air monitoring would be conducted at the site in the coming weeks. Police officials said the petroleum did not come from the station house's own fuel tanks, but had migrated via underground streams from leaking tanks on nearby properties. Nonetheless, the city installed a temporary \$38,000 treatment system earlier this year to remove the vapors and pump out the contaminants, a combination of gasoline and home heating oil.

A full cleanup of the property is planned next year as part of a program by the city's Department of Design and Construction to eliminate fuel oil contamination at city-owned buildings, said Matthew Monahan, a spokesman for the agency. Mr. Monahan said 57 police station houses had been identified as sites of petroleum spills, while cleanups had been completed or begun at 20.

Officers at the 50th Precinct said the city had responded too slowly, saying officials drew up a cleanup plan for the property as far back as 1997 but did not put it into effect until this year.

Mr. Monahan said the city could not go forward with that plan because the contractor who designed it had not been hired to do that type of work. He said it took time to solicit bids from other companies for the work, and the agency thought immediate action was not necessary because no one had identified a pressing health concern at the building.

But Walter Hang, president of Toxics Targeting, an environmental research firm in Ithaca, N.Y., that has done consulting work for the police union, said the spill at the 50th Precinct station house was more serious than most. "There

are thousands of spills hither and yon," he said, "but most of them do not penetrate buildings where people are working around the clock."

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GRAPHIC: Photos: At the 66th Precinct station house in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn, the boiler room has been pressed into duty as office space, and 50 female officers share one toilet. (Keith Meyers/The New York Times)(pg. B1); The Central Park police station house is a 130-year-old converted stable. Officers who work there describe conditions as Dickensian. (Keith Meyers/The New York Times)(pg. B4)

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