Same Harlem Building Source Of 2 Deadly Legionnaires' Outbreaks

A cooling tower at the Sugar Hill Project on St. Nicholas Avenue is responsible for both deadly uptown Legionnaires' outbreaks this year.

By Brendan Krisel, Patch National Staff | Nov 9, 2018 4:10 pm ET | Updated Nov 9, 2018 4:39 pm ET

UPPER MANHATTAN, NY — A Harlem high-rise apartment complex is once again the source of a deadly outbreak of Legionnaires’ Disease in Upper Manhattan, city officials announced Friday.
A Department of Health investigation revealed that cooling towers at the Sugar Hill Project on St. Nicholas Avenue near West 155th Street were the likely source of a Legionnaires' outbreak that sickened 32 people, with one fatal case. The building was the source of an outbreak that sickened 27 people, again with one fatal case, in July.

"Sampling conducted at the start of the investigation revealed that Legionella bacteria had returned quickly despite a comprehensive remediation, suggesting that there was potentially something unique in this cooling tower system.," Acting Department of Health Commissioner Dr. Oxiris Barbot.

The apartment complex shut down its cooling systems on Oct. 18 and will remain inactive until "Sugar Hill management demonstrates that it has remediated it and can operate the tower safely," Barbot said in a statement. Once the towers are re-activated, building management will be required to provide weekly samples to the city.

This is the first time that one cooling tower has been linked to two separate Legionnaires' Disease outbreaks in the city, health officials said. Moving forward, the city plans to examine the design of the tower, convene a panel of water system engineers to advise building owners on properly designing safer towers and introduce stricter cooling tower regulations, officials said.

City Councilman Mark Levine, who represents areas of Harlem and Washington Heights, called on the Department of Health to "immediately" put in place stronger safeguards to prevent another case of repeat contamination.

"From the moment we learned of a second legionnaires cluster at the same location in upper Manhattan, I began asking pressing questions: are there defects in cooling tower equipment which make them vulnerable to repeat contamination? How long does intense monitoring last after a tower is found to be contaminated once?" Levine said in a statement.

"Five weeks — and one oversight hearing — after Lower Washington Heights was hit with a second deadly cluster, we still don’t have adequate answers to these questions. DOHMH
needs to move immediately to put in place better protocols to prevent this kind of repeat contamination."

Photo by Google Maps street view