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Housing Authority blasted by Councilwoman Rosie Mendez following Daily News investigation

BY **TINA MOORE**
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Monday, May 4th 2009, 4:00 AM

City Councilwoman Rosie Mendez blasted the Housing Authority Sunday for letting employees commute on the taxpayers' dime - including one who made regular trips to the [Poconos](#).

"The taxpayers of **New York** deserve a thorough investigation of how NYCHA, and indeed all other city agencies, allow employees to use city vehicles for nonauthorized travel to and from work," Mendez said in response to a Daily News investigation.

Also reacting, NYCHA officials said they would reduce the number of employees permitted to drive to and from work in agency vehicles by about 85% - from 171 to 25.

Mendez, who leads the Council's subcommittee on public housing, said she plans to question NYCHA about its vehicle use at the committee's next hearing.

"The city must be reimbursed for improper expenses and individuals who engaged in this behavior, or turned a blind eye on it, should be removed from their positions," she said.

The News reported that dozens of Housing Authority employees - some of them making six-figure salaries - commuted in agency cars, vans and SUVs every day.

The employees often made no other trips during the work day.

Jerome Paige drove 200 miles nearly every weekend from [Brooklyn](#) to a home in an exclusive [Poconos](#) community in 2007 and 2008, the review found. The agency stripped him of his commuting rights on Friday, spokesman **Howard Marder** said.

The same wasn't true of **Luis Ponce**, the technical services director, who drives 200 miles a day between his [Pennsylvania](#) home and [Long Island City](#) office, records show.

Ponce made the 100-mile trek across state lines 13 times between May 7 and May 18, 2007, racking up 1,261 miles. He made few other trips in the period.

Marder said Ponce must be available around the clock to respond to emergencies.

"He drives to wherever he is needed in any of the five boroughs," Marder said.

The trip from Ponce's home in [East Stroudsburg](#), Pa., to the nearest [New York City](#) public housing development takes about two hours.

Ponce's deputy **Michael Abruzzo** frequently uses his agency car to commute 20 miles from his home to the Long Island City office.

Abruzzo made the commute and no other trips in his 2008 [Toyota Prius](#) more than 35 days out of the 70 days he used the car from Jan. 1 to April 30 last year, trip logs show.

Even when he made work-related trips, his weekly log shows he nearly always returned to the office before driving home.

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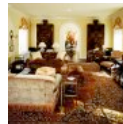
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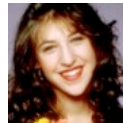
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