Public Housing Residents Fight for their Homes

By Marcy Rein

Charlotte Delgado is on a tear. “They have run public housing into the ground until it is so bad they cannot begin to fix it,” she tells her audience at the U.S. Social Forum. Delgado wound up in HUD multifamily subsidized housing after being diagnosed with cancer 25 years ago. She beat the disease seven times and now serves as vice president/west of the National Alliance of HUD Tenants (NAHT). From her toes to her carefully rolled blonde “do,” Delgado exudes indignation.

“What they intend to do is give it to the banks, let the banks fix it up and rent it out—and in a maximum of 30 years, they can get out of the [public housing] program!” she says, stabbing the air with her finger.

“I live in Sacramento, eight blocks from the state capitol and my building was the first in the state taken over by a for-profit in 1998,” Delgado continues. “My rent went from $595 to $825 overnight. And out of the 103 families who lived in my complex, there are only 29 of us left.”

The supply of housing for low and very low income families in the U.S. is melting away, even as people lose jobs to the recession and homes to foreclosure. (Unemployment and foreclosure rates are even higher in communities of color.) The damage from decades of official neglect of the housing stock is piling up and still-solid structures will soon become unlivable if nothing is done to repair them.

Government contracts with landlords are expiring, as in Delgado’s case, which lets owners put tens of thousands of units back on the private market and out of the price range of low-income families. Plus, a new Obama administration proposal threatens to privatize the country’s remaining stock of government-owned housing. Faced with escalating threats, public housing residents are using every tool at their disposal—from lawsuits and lobbying to mobilization and direct action—to keep their homes.

Families Call the Projects Home

About six million families in the U.S. live in some form of social housing—2.3 million in developments that follow the original New Deal model of government-owned buildings operated by local housing authorities, and the rest in subsidized housing under 13 different federal programs. Since President Richard Nixon declared a construction moratorium in 1973, the government has been contracting with private developers and property owners who agree to keep housing affordable for a specific period of time in return for subsidies.

Since the mid 1990s, the U.S. has lost 150,000 units of government-owned housing. Some have fallen to demolition under HOPE VI and other projects that promised newer and better mixed-income housing. Others have been lost to “disposition,” when local
housing authorities decided to dispose of their housing stock by selling it to private owners. (Atlanta and San Diego have completely eliminated their public housing stock.)

The loss of public housing scatters people who have deep roots in a place, tatters the social fabric, and shatters community, according to a 2010 report entitled “We Call These Projects Home,” by the national Right to the City Alliance (RTTC). To produce it RTTC drew on the voices and expertise of public housing residents to inform the analysis and ended up with a picture that defies the media-fed stereotype. (See box on page 48.)

“Our research shows that public housing is and always has been a vital and necessary option for low-income communities of color. Overall, residents believe that public housing provides a strong sense of community and want to see public policies that strengthen rather than dismantle it,” wrote RTTC’s HUD workgroup.

More than 70 percent of public housing residents are people of color. “For sure, racism is always there. Lots of people feel it,” says Anne Washington, an activist with Community Voices Heard in New York City. She has lived in General Grant Housing on Broadway near 125th Street for 22 years and raised her children there.

“People have this negative stereotype about public housing, even friends of my kids, my daughter-in-law... People think of us as drug addicts, drug pushers, prostitutes. Most of the people in this building work. They have families. They stay here because it’s affordable,” Washington says.

**LIFFT Wins Landmark Agreement**

In Miami, Fla., the Scott-Carver public housing project was no worse than other poor neighborhoods, says Yvonne Stratford, a former resident and activist with the Miami Workers Center. “We had lots of generations there—grandparents and great-grandparents. We had a big yard, people sat on their porches, barbecued... That housing stood for 54 years and would’ve lasted another 54. The buildings were made of concrete. People used to run to the projects in a hurricane because they were safer.”

But starting in 2003, Scott-Carver was crushed by the wrecking ball after the Miami-Dade Housing Authority got a HOPE VI grant. For the 850 units torn down and the 1100 people scattered, the Housing Authority was only going to offer 50 units of replacement housing on the site. Former Scott-Carver residents worked with LIFFT (Low Income Families Fighting Together), a project of the Miami Workers Center, to fight for one-to-one replacement and their right to return. They lobbied the Miami City Council and Dade County Commission and sat in at the HUD office. In 2007, they occupied the last standing Scott-Carver building and launched the “Find Our People” campaign. By putting up an eight-foot board around the building and putting out the word, they succeeded in tracking down 400 of the 600 former Scott-Carver residents that the local HUD office had “lost.” People simply came by and wrote names, addresses, and numbers on the board—with crosses next to the names of those who had died.

After a 10-year campaign, LIFFT won an agreement from the city to make public housing available for all the displaced residents—177 to move back on site and others to go into subsidized housing being built in the neighborhood. The activists’ challenge now is to remain in contact with the displaced residents and ensure that the housing authority follows through on its promise.

“We wrote signs that say ‘We’re watching you!’ and put them on the gate where they’re supposed to be building,” says Stratford.

Miami razed Scott-Carver before the real estate bubble burst. “This was a time when Liberty City was one of the ground zeros for gentrification,” says Tony Romano, former organizing director for the Workers Center. “You had these hawks, these investors from all over the country turn to real estate, buy stuff up, and start flipping it.”

As cities become desirable living space and white flight reverses, building owners see the chance to profit from opting out of their affordable housing agreements.

At a U.S. Social Forum workshop, Judy Montanez, an NAHT Board member and co-chair of the tenants’ association at Castleton Park—a mixed-income subsidized apartment house on Staten Island, New York—told the audience, “My building faces the Statue of Liberty. It’s convenient, it has waterfront views... All of a sudden in 2003, we have new management [saying] they want to opt out of their Section 8 contract. They
wanted to sell to Lawrence Gluck, who’s known for predatory equity. He wants to turn public housing into luxury properties.”

Montanez and another tenant hooked up with housing coalitions in the city and began asking questions. They found a clause in the National Housing Act that requires buildings with insured mortgages, such as Castleton Park, to remain affordable unless they can prove that there is no need for affordable housing in the community. So, with the help of Legal Aid, they sued HUD to enforce the federal law. They talked to local and state politicians and to their congressman. They brought busloads of people to rally in front of HUD’s office. In 2007, HUD agreed to enforce the law. The owners appealed twice and lost, but the case is still in court awaiting a final appeal.

Montanez credits the tenants’ association—which they built and sustained—for their success. “It’s a lot of work,” she says, “but you have to become knowledgeable.” Lots of tenants will need to learn quickly.

**PETRA Points to Privatization**

Around 260,000 federally subsidized units are in buildings whose HUD-subsidized 40-year mortgages expire by 2013, according to NAHT Executive Director Michael Kane. Since 1995, at least that many units have been lost to expiring contracts while another 100,000 have been lost to foreclosure.

The Obama Administration’s proposal for the “Preservation, Enhancement, and Transformation of Rental Assistance” (PETRA) widens the path to privatization that was opened when the federal government started contracting with private companies. The proposal appears to put both housing stock and residents at risk.

PETRA would allow housing authorities to convert all their stock to privately owned subsidized housing and mortgage the properties to pay for repairs. In its current form the proposal fails to provide Federal Housing Administration (FHA) insurance on the mortgages and makes no provision for keeping the housing under public control should the owner default, thus raising the specter of a foreclosure crisis in public housing. Moreover, PETRA does not guarantee that subsidized units will remain permanently affordable.

“When they only require a 20- to 30-year use agreement for private developers, then give them the option to pull out, that is not permanent affordability,” Montanez says. “What happened to the concept of public housing? You won’t have it any more if you offer it to private developers and private financing.”

Even when affordable, market-based subsidized housing is less stable and secure for residents. They must search for housing, hope to find landlords who will take vouchers, hope to meet the screening criteria. They have to come up with deposits and utility payments, often a hardship for very low-income people. And under some programs, landlords are free
to terminate voucher holders after a year.

And since it merges the rules and funding for all 13 housing programs, PETRA could replace the stronger rights afforded to public housing residents with the weaker safeguards available to people in subsidized housing.

**HUD Breaks Promise, Congress Avoids Decision**

In December 2009, HUD officials began meeting with a group of public housing residents to get their input on PETRA, according to Erik Crawford, president of the Davidson/Site 166 Residents' Association in New York. HUD promised to bring the final proposal to the group before giving it to Congress, but when the residents reconvened in April they found that the bill had been submitted the day before.

A preliminary hearing before the Housing and Community Opportunity Subcommittee of the House Financial Services Committee at the end of May drew storms of criticism. According to DeAngelo Bester, the housing justice campaign coordinator for National People's Action, Congress is unlikely to take action on anything so controversial before mid-terms, which throws the future of public housing into the uncharted waters of the next Congress.

National People's Action organized meetings between HUD staff and public housing residents in several cities this fall and in Crawford's opinion, the organizing, education, and strong recommendations have made a big difference so far.

“But we need to speak with a unified voice,” he adds. “Someone's going to get hurt if we don't get together.”

Back at the U.S. Social Forum, Delgado hit the same note: “The private owners believe they have enough clout to kill any bill they object to, but for every owner there are tenants and we should be speaking. United we stand, divided we're homeless.”

**Endnotes**

3. www.righttothecity.org/we-call-these-projects-home.html

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**Media Bias against Public Housing**

In researching “We call these Projects Home,” Right To The City (RTTC) analyzed a random sample of 400 newspaper articles from eight cities over three years and found that the media propagates the popular stereotype of public housing projects as “high rise hellholes full of drug dealers, guns, and violence.” The most common words found in the articles were “gun,” “poverty,” “crime,” “gang,” and “drug.” The articles often name public housing as the source of social problems but say little about the root causes of those problems. They also fail to report residents’ positive views of their community and frequently cite “demolition” as a solution to the problems of public housing.

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