

Seniors face eviction in Detroit gentrification plan

A WSWWS reporting team
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Retired workers living in a rent-subsidized senior housing building are facing eviction in downtown Detroit. New owners who recently took over their apartment building have given the elderly residents on fixed income a year to clear out so they can raise rents to “market rates.”

The evictions at the 127-unit, 12-story residential building on Griswold—which follows a similar action against more than 300 residents at the Henry Street apartments in nearby Cass Corridor—is part of the plans by real estate developers and the city’s emergency manager to gentrify the downtown and Midtown areas.

A new partnership called 1214 Griswold Apartments, created by the Broder & Sachse real estate firm in Birmingham, recently purchased the apartment building in the Capitol Park district downtown, according to the *Detroit Free Press*. On March 29, residents were given notice that the new owners would terminate the Section 8 contract with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and that HUD rent subsidies would expire on March 31, 2014. Giving seniors one year to move, the notice said the new owners “anticipate the asking market rent will exceed the rental subsidy available under the current HUD mobile voucher program.”

Like the Henry Street residents, the retirees are being tossed out on the street and told to rely on HUD vouchers to find a place to live. “This time next year, I’ll be homeless,” Samuel, a 68-year-old retired factory worker who has lived at the apartments for 12 years, told the WSWWS.

“What happens if the HUD vouchers aren’t accepted? A piece of paper isn’t a roof over your head. And they pass out the vouchers in December. That means that we have to search for apartments in the winter. None of us can go out then. It’s too cold.”

Samuel gave WSWWS reporters a tour of his carpeted apartment, which is approximately 800 square feet in size and furnished with comfortable couches and chairs. The wall facing outside was covered by mostly one large window, allowing natural light to stream in.

“All my life I just wanted a stable place to live and peace of mind. This is a very nice place and this was supposed to be my resting place. The apartments are large enough to feel like a small home. There is a recreation room and social area on the third floor.

“I felt fortunate when I came here. I pay \$150 a month and Section 8 and HUD pays the rest. Where else will I find a place that is as comfortable as here? I hate to leave. It’s the same with others, some have been here for 20 to 25 years.

“If we could get assistance to move, and if they had new houses ready for us, it would be alright. But all HUD has promised us is a voucher to relocate. Where can we go? There are a lot of places that don’t accept HUD vouchers. The average age here is 75, and most everyone is disabled.”

Another tenant commented about the changes taking place downtown, particularly the fact that Quicken Loans executive and multi-billionaire Dan Gilbert is buying up buildings across the city. “Gilbert doesn’t care about us, about the little man. To me, he acts like he wants to buy Detroit. He’s doing a damn good job of it. He’s bought all these buildings around us. Money talks and he’s got enough money to do it. And if you don’t have enough money, forget it.

“I’ve believe he’s been planning this a long time. People have been coming down here taking pictures, everyday, in the last few years. I knew something was going to jump off. It’s outrageous. We don’t have a place to go. Gilbert has his name everywhere.

“A lot of us thought this was going to be our last stop.

We weren't going to move out. We have tenants that are 90 years old. Many people have been here for thirty years. We love Griswold. We don't want to move."

Cleaster Snerling added, "The total rent is a little more than \$800. The new owners want to charge \$1600 after the renovations."

Cleaster explained that the building was designed as low-income subsidized housing for seniors. "The rent goes according to your income. HUD pays the rest. You sign a lease for one year, and you get a voucher from the government that pays for most of it. A small amount is out of pocket. Since we only get the voucher once a year, we have to wait until December before we get a new one, before we can start looking for new homes. Even then, we don't know what we're going to do."

The life-and-death concerns of Griswold residents are of no concern to the corporate and political establishment in Detroit, which is seeking to restructure the city, using the dictatorial powers of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, to benefit the wealthy bondholders and other corporate interests. Along with mass evictions, city workers are facing attacks on pensions and wages, while Orr eyes the city water system, Belle Isle recreation area and other public assets as targets for privatization.

"The landscape has changed dramatically in a short period of time," Steve Morris, managing partner for the Mohr Partners real estate firm in Farmington Hills, told the *Free Press*. "Thousands of young people are in the area where they need to walk to work and to buy their staples. It'll be a home run."

In fact, the newer residents of the downtown area, many who work for moderate wages at Quicken Loans and other downtown businesses, will be forced to double and triple up to pay the exorbitant rents in local apartment buildings that have quickly been leased out. George W. Jackson Jr., president of the Detroit Economic Growth Corp., told the *Free Press* projects like the 1214 Griswold conversion are needed to grow the market for downtown living and to boost the city's tax base. He said there was an "abundance" of other housing available for low-income residents. "Detroit probably has more affordable housing than any other major city in the country."

While there are thousands of abandoned and rotting structures around the city, there is in fact an acute

shortage of affordable housing. The number of renters has sharply increased as homeowners have been forced from their homes by foreclosures and the calamitous fall in home values.

In January, an estimated 5,000 people from the metropolitan Detroit area, including many homeless, single mothers or disabled workers, lined up overnight in nearby Taylor to get Section 8 housing vouchers. Police shut down the distribution after people in the line, which grew to a mile long, were told all 1,000 available vouchers had been given out.



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