

# Chicago residents thrown out ahead of eviction moratorium

**Christopher Davion**  
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On December 13, six residents of the 147-unit Astor House building on Chicago's far north side were evicted from their apartments. The evictions were carried out in freezing temperatures, three days prior to the start of Cook County's holiday moratorium on evictions lasting until January 2nd.

The county sheriff is also barred from enforcing evictions if temperatures dip below 15 degrees.

Over the last year, residents have protested over the dilapidated and filthy living conditions at the complex, including broken elevators, lack of hot water, uncompleted renovations, and rodent and insect infestations.

Charles Roth, 55, one of the tenants evicted on the 13th, was forced out of his studio apartment. Plagued by severe health problems, Roth died in intensive care on December 18. Roth was too sick to go to a temporary shelter. He was recovering from alcoholism and suffered from liver and peripheral artery disease, requiring a live-in caretaker. At the time of his eviction, he was bedridden and unable to walk. After his eviction, Roth's health severely deteriorated at the hospital, and he was placed in intensive care.

James Barnett, who had volunteered to be Roth's caretaker, had been living with Roth for the past three months and so was also forced out. Barnett had assumed caregiving responsibility after Roth's brother, who had previously been assisting Roth and was his last known surviving relative, died earlier in the year.

Barnett spoke to DNAInfo, a Chicago neighborhood media outlet, about the eviction: "They basically knocked on the door, they came into the apartment with the sheriff's [deputies] and said we were being evicted.

"All of this could have been avoided, and Chuck would not have been evicted and he probably would have still been alive. I know he would still be alive. This was a man that was wronged and this is why I'm still fighting for him. This man did not get any justice."

BJB Properties, which acquired Astor House in October 2012, is a large real estate corporation owning properties in the most expensive areas of the city. Astor House is in the economically and socially diverse neighborhood of Rogers Park in Chicago's far north side. The company claimed the tenants evicted last week had not paid rent.

At the conclusion of a December 16 hearing on the eviction of Roth, the judge declined to take immediate action. The next court date was set for December 26, but Roth died December 18.

The December 13 evictions came as a shock to other residents, who were under the impression BJB Properties would wait until after the holiday moratorium. The eviction notices were served in September.

"Everybody got evicted on Friday," Arbie Bowman, a former Astor House tenant who attended Roth's hearing, told DNAInfo. "They thought they'd have until next year to find other places to live."

Bowman, a 45-year-old worker, said she had lived in the building with her daughter for nearly three years before she was served with an eviction notice. "It's a shame what we have to do to keep affordable housing," she said. Describing the deplorable living conditions they faced in the building under both prior and current building management, she added, "My daughter can't even take a bath" because of mold in the bathroom worsening her asthma, and that sometimes the water doesn't get hot enough to take a shower.

Bowman described how she and her daughter contended with ongoing rodent and bed bug infestations in the last three years, explaining the infestation was so bad that at one time her daughter slept on top of a coffee table to avoid being bitten throughout the night. "No one should have to live in these conditions," she added.

In addition to the costs associated with moving, for Astor residents paying \$550 a month for a single bedroom apartment comparable rent is extremely hard to come by on the north side of the city. Similar BJB properties go for \$900 to \$1,295 a month.

Earlier this year, residents had to contend with flooding and two separate arson incidents.

The property was purchased by BJB Properties in October 2012, along with the Chateau Hotel, a cheap hotel that was relied on by the homeless in the affluent Lakeview neighborhood. The company holds approximately 40 properties across Chicago and is aiming to renovate them to raise rents and attract affluent middle class tenants.

Since BJB acquired and began renovating the building and

raising rents last October, the company has sought to empty the building of the many long-time tenants. BJB acquired the Astor House to market it to students attending nearby Loyola University. Many low-income tenants have either been evicted or asked by management to find other housing.

Tenants' efforts to appeal to city Democratic politicians have been useless. Residents sought the help of 49th Ward Alderman Joe Moore, with written complaints and two protests outside his office earlier in the year. Moore responded with a contemptuous dismissal of the tenants. Referring to the claim from management that some Astor residents haven't paid rent for several months, Moore proclaimed that the tenants facing eviction were making "unreasonable demands."

"I'm more than willing to advocate on behalf of any tenant who has a legitimate complaint," he said. "However, I refuse to be used as a tool to justify some tenant organizer's salary."

The shrinking availability of low income housing for working class and poor residents on Chicago's north side is part of a larger phenomenon stemming from the capitalist economic crisis. The lack of affordable housing in Chicago historically predates the collapse of the real estate bubble and the onset of the economic crisis in 2008.

The dramatic decline in manufacturing jobs and factories in Chicago over the last 50 years (Cook County lost more than a quarter of its manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2010) was coupled with the shift to professional services and related jobs increasingly being located in the city. This resulted in the reduction of available jobs in the Chicago area for working class residents, while increasing the demand for more upscale housing for the affluent professionals working in the downtown area.

Near North Side neighborhoods with concentrations of public housing, such as the former Cabrini Green Housing projects, saw profound deterioration and population decline, while other north side neighborhoods experienced dramatic gentrification, first on the north side lakefront and then spreading west.

By the 1990s, private developers had transformed thousands of acres of former industrial and manufacturing areas on the Near North Side into more upscale commercial and residential spaces. The area surrounding the neglected housing projects was eventually bought up by housing speculators with the understanding that the projects would be torn down and replaced with more upscale housing and commercial developments.

In 2000 the Chicago Housing Authority announced its \$1.6 billion "Plan for Transformation" program to replace the city's former high-rise housing developments, such as the now-demolished Cabrini Green and Robert Taylor Homes, with redevelopment to attract commercial business ventures and higher income residents. Subsequently, the program was designed to scatter the low-income families and households who relied upon affordable public housing across the city's greater metropolitan area. This was an attempt to

"decentralize" poverty, rather than provide jobs and opportunities and raise living standards.

Through this process, as in other former manufacturing centers such as Detroit, working class residents left the city in large numbers. Those remaining, either unemployed or working in low-wage jobs, face cutbacks in social programs and a struggle to find housing amid the shrinking pool of low income units that remain.

The aggressive buy-up and renovation of Northside properties such as the Astor House is an investment aimed at higher rents in newly "revitalized" neighborhoods. There were 2,500 single room occupancies (SROs) lost in the Chicago area in the course of 2012 to real estate developers' profiteering.

However, the Democratic-controlled city governments, as in Detroit and nationally, are responsible for the encouragement of the "upscale" commercial and residential development that squeezes out the poor and working class. Millions of dollars in public funds have been looted through a scheme called Tax Increment Financing (TIF). A study has shown that despite all the TIF money and other public funds being poured into downtown development, very few jobs were created for the unemployed in Chicago.

The increasing lack of affordable housing for broad layers of the population is part of the social conditions for which both parties of big business are responsible. In the course of 2013 under Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former White House chief of staff, 50 schools were closed, the largest number in US history, and additional millions of dollars were slashed from schools already staggering from underfunding. In 2012, half of Chicago's mental health facilities were shuttered.

On the state level, Illinois' budget crisis has been utilized to halt funding for vital services and pensions. Millions are being invested in the gentrification of former working class neighborhoods and centers of manufacturing while city officials insist that there is no money for affordable housing, education, health care and other essential services. Working class and poor residents are being displaced en masse from their homes with nowhere to find decent and affordable housing.



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