

Public housing crisis intensifies in Syracuse, New York

Steve Filips
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In Syracuse, New York, thousands of low-income workers and families have to wait years for access to public housing. As of last year, more than 3,000 people were on waiting lists for openings in the mere 3,500 public housing units throughout the city. Funding for public housing in both Syracuse and nationwide has been cut drastically even as more and more people are in need of affordable and decent housing.

An additional 6,800 people are on the waiting list for section 8 vouchers—now referred to as the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program—which allows people to rent from private landlords. The average person has to wait over three years before being placed in a home.

Like other programs for low-income people, funds for public housing have been cut at both the federal and state levels. From 2010 to 2015, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has cut its main grant to states and cities for helping low-income renters and homeowners by 50 percent—from \$1.8 billion to just \$900 million.

Last month, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that \$141 million would be allocated statewide for low-income housing this year. This is part of a 10-year, \$1 billion program for low-income housing, which Cuomo is citing as the largest investment in housing in 20 years. However, this falls far short of the billions required to repair existing public housing projects, let alone build new decent and affordable homes for people in need. New York City's public housing alone needs over \$18 billion in repairs.

Furthermore, all of the funds announced in Cuomo's plan will be given to developers as grants, tax credits or low-interest loans instead of going to local housing authorities. For instance, Syracuse will receive just \$2.7 million, which will be provided to private developer Sutton Real Estate Co., in partnership with the non-

profit Bentham Foundation. The funds will be used for the conversion of a former warehouse into 40 loft apartments with 35 of them designated for low and moderate income tenants.

This amounts to no more than a drop in the bucket for the thousands of families in need, many on waiting lists for years.

Maiya Hoston, 22, who lives in the Westside neighborhood, said, "I have been on the housing list for three years. I am number 186, so I will have to wait another year. There needs to be more housing for people around here. You shouldn't have to wait two and three years to get into a place to live.

"I am paying \$550 plus utilities—that is very hard to afford. The landlord doesn't keep the place up. My dad comes out to fix the place or paint a room when I need it. The landlord won't fix anything.

"I work, door-to-door knocking, getting customer orders. It is not an hourly job. I only get paid commission for the orders I get. I am looking for better work, but there is none out there.

"It is hard to find jobs. I have looked everywhere and am always putting in applications. You go to a restaurant, and they say they are hiring, but you put in your application, and you never hear from them."

A significant factor toward the shortage of affordable housing was the foreclosure crisis that left many former homeowners scrambling for affordable housing. For many people, the possible option of home ownership is now out of the question.

An effect of the housing crisis is seen in the many vacant foreclosed homes that are left disintegrating. Many of these have been bought up by investors and slumlords who rent them out without making any repairs.

Making matters worse, the 400 units of public

housing at Kennedy Square in Syracuse were torn down in 2013 to make room for a public-private development on the 14 acres of land now owned by the State University of New York (SUNY) Upstate Medical University. The 400 housing units were never fully replaced, and the many families who lived there were forced out on short notice.

The WSWS spoke with residents of the nearby Pioneer Homes public housing complex, which was one of five of the first public housing projects ever built. At over 75 years old, the buildings and their 607 apartments are in poor repair and outdated. The last renovation was done over 20 years ago.

Janice Pope, who has been living at Pioneer since 1986, had this to say about the housing conditions: “People are waiting way too long to get a home. There needs to be more homes not less. There are a lot of people who need a roof over their heads.

“Lots of people are not working and looking for work, but there are no jobs, and the jobs that are around don’t pay very well. People are ending up homeless, and there is no place for them to go.

“There needs to be a lot more money for public housing so that people don’t have to wait so long.”

While near downtown and Syracuse University, Pioneer is built like an island, keeping residents cut off from the rest of the community. On the one side is an interstate highway on an elevated viaduct, producing an incessant rumble of traffic. On the other side is the unsightly presence of Syracuse University’s industrial steam station.

The US Census Bureau found a poverty rate of 58 percent in 2013 for the 5,438 people living in the 13202 zip code where Pioneer Homes are located. The poverty rate for children is 72 percent. The Census also reported that over 31 percent of those residing there had no employment the preceding 12 months.

Residents are also faced with cuts to other city services including recreational opportunities, particularly for young people. The Wilson pool at Pioneer Homes has been shut down indefinitely, along with many of the organized activities related to the pool.

Sharief Gunn is living at Pioneer with his daughter Adaya, age 5. When asked about the housing conditions in the area, Sharief said, “It could be better. It could be a lot better. Most of the houses are in bad

repair—now they want you to pay for something to be fixed.

“Say your cabinet in your kitchen breaks. You have someone from housing fix it. Someone else has been living there 40 to 50 years [putting wear and tear on it] but they then send you a bill. This is low-income housing, so where are we supposed come up with money to fix their apartments?!

“There is not enough public housing. People are on a waiting list for two or three years. When my daughter was born, they should have automatically moved my baby’s mother into a two-bedroom apartment, but they didn’t. They ended up waiting over eight months.

“I have three sons, and they have myself and all three sons living in a one-bedroom apartment. I have been trying to get a bigger apartment since 2006. Now they are saying that by having my sons living with me, I am violating the lease, and they want to throw me out. I had put their names down when I moved in here.

“When I grew up, we had picnics, field trips, there were job programs—now there is nothing here. They say that there is no money.”



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