

Low-income retirees in the Detroit-area face abysmal housing conditions

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An acute lack of affordable housing along with deadly and deplorable conditions in existing housing for the low-income elderly has left tens of thousands of Detroit area retirees with no safe and healthy place to live out their retirement.

Affordable housing has nearly vanished for extremely low-income renters. A 2015 Urban Institute report states, “not a single county in the United States has enough affordable housing for all its extremely low-income (ELI) renters.” Many elderly and disabled people fall into the category of ELI because government assistance is so meager.

In the Wayne County, Michigan, area (Detroit), an ELI renter is one that receives less than \$14,000 per year in total income. Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert and a series of Democratic Detroit mayors have systematically demolished 50 percent of the available units in the Detroit area. Gilbert was the driving force behind the Detroit Blight Task Force, which was set up to carry out the wholesale demolition of existing housing stocks as part of the so-called recovery of Detroit.

The Urban Institute report gives special emphasis to Detroit where, like Milwaukee and Chicago, there are far more LI renters than there are apartments. It notes the crisis is acute and getting worse year by year. “In Wayne County, Michigan, the negative trend is the result of a precipitous drop in the supply of affordable housing for ELI renters, from about 48,000 units to about 24,500.”

Conditions at federally subsidized housing sites for seniors and disabled people in the Detroit area are deplorable. Typical are the conditions in the Detroit suburb of Ferndale where, during the heat wave of recent weeks, an elderly resident contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* about the lack of adequate air

conditioning in her building. The tenant of Autumn House, one of the sites administered by the Ferndale Housing Commission (FHC), told the WSWS that management had set up fans in the sweltering hallways.

The Ferndale Housing Commission continues to receive complaints from tenants, but many who try to speak out at meetings are ignored.

The tenant of Autumn House told the WSWS that the Commission replies to all complaints with the refrain, “there is no money.”

Some of the conditions noted by residents of Autumn House in an FHC survey one year ago include:

- * Sweltering temperatures in the building, sometimes rising to 90 – 95 Fahrenheit.

- * Lack of screen doors making it impossible to leave outside doors open for ventilation.

- * Lack of adequate cleaning and maintenance. Inadequate abatement of bedbugs.

The tenant told the WSWS, “I haven’t bought an air conditioner because I can’t afford it. Once you get an air conditioner it also costs for electricity. Having no air conditioning is not good for peoples’ health. Why pay rent when you’re not comfortable? This is 2016! How can you have people living in these hot boxes with no air conditioning, especially people that are old and sick?

“I have a breathing machine and an inhaler. There are people with asthma and breathing problems that end up going to the hospital. There was a guy who went to the hospital whose breathing was so bad they said he could have died.”

“The majority of people that are able to get about will go somewhere else where there is air. Last year I spent the majority of time at the library. I would go in there and sit and read books just to get the cool air and try to stay their long enough to where it would cool down

outside.

A HUD inspection in 2011 leveled several citations against FHC for providing substandard housing, yet tenants still are living in terrible conditions.

“They tried to put me out when I was out of town seeing about my son in Las Vegas. The attorney from Legal Aid put a monkey wrench in it and got it canceled. He has been fighting all my battles for me, except for the charges for my toilet and my lock. I have a bill for a lock change and for repairing a toilet back-up and it comes to something over \$200. I ask them, ‘how am I supposed to live if I’m giving you all my money’?”

“It’s horrible to leave your apartment and then come home and find your things gone. It’s horrible in there. There was a guy who wanted to rent a place to live and he knocked on the window and I told him ‘I’m not trying to get into your business but if you don’t mind dealing with bedbugs, roaches, mice, rats and not getting any of your needs met then this is your place. Then he said ‘Oh no!’

“When I signed the papers to move in and then I said I’d like to see the apartment and she told me ‘Oh no we don’t do things like that. We will give you the keys and you can move in on such and such a day, but we don’t show you the apartment.’ So I asked her for my money back and she said, ‘We don’t do that either.’”

In September 2015, residents marched in front of HUD offices in downtown Detroit. The resident of Autumn House said, “What was so bad was when we went down to demonstrate in front of HUD, there were about 30 of us, and they came out and told us we were making too much noise, and had a few of us come inside and talk to them. I was one of them. Then they told us everyone was out to lunch.”

Several HUD inspections beginning in 2011 leveled citations against FHC for providing substandard housing, yet the problems continue.

Just last month in another housing development, a racially integrated apartment building for the elderly and disabled residents in Ypsilanti, 30 miles west of Detroit, the same types of conditions were exposed. Residents called a local news station complaining they had been living for at least six months in an 11-story apartment building, Towne Center Apartments, with elevators operational for no more than a few minutes at a time and only sporadically. Without reliable

elevators, the residents in wheelchairs and frail elderly are locked in or out of their apartments for long stretches of time.

Forest City Real Estate, traded on the New York Stock Exchange with \$10 billion in assets, owns Towne Center Apartments.

Medical personnel told the local television news they were unable to see their homebound patients because they themselves could not climb the stairs to the upper floors of the eleven-story building.

The FHC has been recently beset by scandal. The former director of the commission, Debra Wilson, used her position to steal from the impoverished tenants. Wilson resigned in disgrace after having been caught red-handed coming out of a tenant’s apartment with the tenant’s prescription painkillers. She had been using a passkey and was replacing residents’ painkillers with Tylenol. Despite this, FHC paid Wilson a \$130,000 severance.



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