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Culture & Society

D.C. rental inspection program lacks teeth, critics say

By Bryce Baschuk, Written for UPI

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 18 (UPI) -- Columbia Heights renter Ezra Israel was attacked by a man with a knife walking the halls of his apartment building in Washington a few months ago.

Israel, 55, said he was accosted when he opened his door at 3 a.m. one day to investigate a strange noise.

"I closed the door and no one got hurt," said Israel. "But he could have come in, stabbed me, raped my wife, who knows?"

Israel, his wife and his nephew share a two-bedroom apartment on the third floor of the Warner apartment building in Columbia Heights, a gentrifying neighborhood in the city where renovated, million-dollar condominiums co-mingle with low-income housing apartments.

Despite repeated calls to the landlord to fix it, Israel said the large, blue door to his building hangs open and he said he often finds condoms, hypodermic needles and vials in the hallways.

Of the 44 rental units available in the building, only six are occupied by tenants, said Leon Thomas, the building's maintenance man, adding that three tenants are expected to leave soon.

"The owners are trying to get everyone out so they can resell," Thomas said.

Israel said he also believes the building owners want to sell the building and worries that he will also be pushed out. A call to the building's landlord in an attempt to reach the owner for comment wasn't immediately returned.

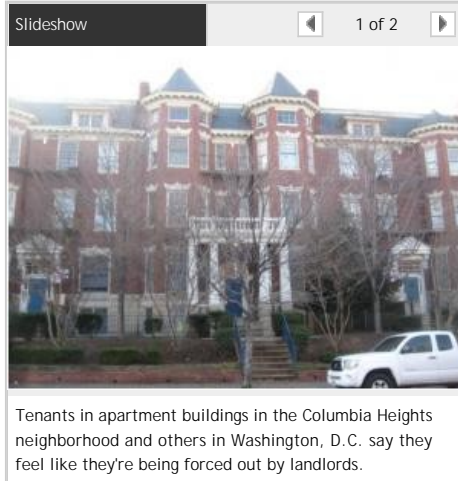
"They want us out of here ... and they are using all types of tactics and schemes to get us out," Israel said. "I don't want to be uprooted."

Israel's story is not uncommon these days in the nation's capital. Area housing counselors say they're seen an uptick in client complaints about landlords who apparently are using a tactic called "eviction by neglect" to get tenants to move.

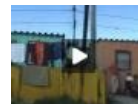
Such complaints started several years ago when apartment building owners in central neighborhoods started converting their units to condominiums, said Michael Rupert, a spokesman for the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs in Washington.

Now, Rupert and District of Columbia Attorney General Peter Nickels are cracking down on such practices.

Rupert's workers are inspecting multi-family buildings across the city for code violations. Since May, the department has logged more than 5,000 housing code violations in about 300 buildings.



Videos



Sometimes, landlords cut off renters' electricity and water, said Marian Siegal, executive director at Housing Counseling Services, a federally approved counseling group based in the Adams Morgan neighborhood.

"[Or they send] people knocking on doors telling tenants they have to leave and giving inadequate and incorrect information to scare them to leave," Siegal said. "We're seeing a lot of that."

The Apartment Owners and Builders Association trade group condemned the practices.

"All it takes is a few of those guys and some terrible stories to engender a belief that it's a lot more widespread than it is," said Shaun Pharr, a trade group spokesman.

Housing inspectors estimate that they can inspect about 100 properties per month. There are nearly 5,000 registered multi-family rental buildings across the city.

Already, the program has had some success, Nickels' office said.

In one case, landlord Edward Knott was sentenced to more than three months in jail after failing to repair a raw sewage cesspool of maggots, mold and mud at a building he managed. The fire alarm didn't work at the building and there were other serious maintenance problems as well.

"The district intends to file additional slumlord lawsuits in the near future that require obstinate property owners to abate housing code violations in their properties," said Nickels.

Pharr praised the inspection crackdown.

"This new program will allow [the city] to bring the hammer down more swiftly on bad housing providers," Pharr said.

But even though there is praise for the new program, some housing counselors say the city is not serious about enforcement.

"I don't know if landlords are taking enforcement seriously because there have been so many years when [the city] hasn't taken it seriously," said Farah Fosse, director of affordable housing preservation at the Latino Economic Development Corporation, a non-profit group in Washington.

"I'm definitely supportive of the proactive inspections," said Fosse. "But the next big thing is getting the system in place to do re-inspections and enforcement."

Fosse said she doesn't think jail sentences are very effective for landlords.

"If there's something really awful then yes we need to put [landlords] in jail," said Fosse. "But really what we want are repairs and a system of fines. My impression is that that is not really happening."

For example, Fosse said she worked with tenants in a building that saw repeated violations from 2004-08. Inspectors repeatedly notified the owner of violations that included structurally unsound walls and stairs, rodent infestation, defective smoke detectors, inoperable fire extinguishers, and broken security doors.

The city sued the owner for noncompliance but the repercussions were not that serious, Fosse said.

"The only fine the owner got was for not following court procedure," said Fosse. "He was not fined at all for any of the serious health and safety ... massive code violations in the building."

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