

Testimony of Tracy Grant, President, Eureka Gardens Tenants' Association

Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development hearing entitled "Oversight of the HUD Inspection Process."

September 22, 2016

I would like to thank Chairman Scott and Senator Rubio for inviting me to testify today. Almost exactly a year ago, I worked with the community of tenants that I lead as the President of the Eureka Gardens Tenants' Association to publicize the conditions that we have to live in every day. I would have scarcely imagined then that today, one year later, I would be testifying before this Committee today in Washington, D.C. In the time I have spent at Eureka Gardens, I have seen and experienced both hardships and triumphs, and I would like to share some of those stories with you today.

My story begins in September 2010, when I applied for the apartment, signed my lease, got my keys and did the walk through. Even early on in my time at Eureka Gardens, I had to deal with mold in the kitchen and bathroom. Some days I would come home and the bathroom was flooded. This bathroom flooding was not done by me or my children, it just happened all by itself. The water even began coming into my room.

That wasn't everything, either. There wasn't an air conditioning unit in my apartment, like with many others. I had to pay the front office manager's husband \$50 to put an air conditioning unit in the window. Now, I don't know how many people in this room have had to endure a Florida summer without air conditioning, but it's not a fun experience, and it felt ridiculous to me that I had to pay off the manager's husband in order to have a necessity like AC in my home.

But the problems at Eureka Gardens didn't stop once I walked out the door. Crime is prevalent in and around Eureka Gardens. There was even a shooting in the area that occurred not long after I moved there. It was then that I realized this was not an environment that I wanted my children to have to grow up in and I wanted to do something about it.

When another young man was shot in October 2014, a lot of the residents were fed up with the poor conditions created by the owner's neglect of the property and the crime it attracted, so we had a resident meeting. There, I realized that I wasn't the only resident that felt this way about Eureka Gardens, and at the next resident meeting I was elected Tenants' Association President.

The nationwide attention that Eureka Gardens has received for gas leaks, persistent mold, and lead poisoning has all occurred during my tenure as President. In September 2015 – just over a year ago – there was a meeting with the Tenants' Association and the owner and management teams where we were supposed to talk about bringing new programs to the neighborhood. But at this meeting, everyone was so frustrated that it turned into a discussion of the conditions they were forcing us to live in.

We were so frustrated by the lack of changes at Eureka Gardens that on September 29, 2015, I wrote a letter outlining our issues and concerns and sent it to our local officials, including the HUD office. On October 2, 2015, I received a response back, and before you knew it we had Mayor Lenny Curry, Councilman Garrett Dennis, Pastor Mark Griffin, the fire marshal, the sheriff lined up in our support. I want to thank our local government officials for their strong support and commitment to our community during this time.

Even with all of this support, conditions did not significantly improve. Gas leaks sent some of our residents to the hospital, and persistent mold made it hard to breathe sometimes. Repair crews often did more harm than good, like when they had to shut off the heat in November. There was even a case where a child had a case of lead poisoning. Crime is still a problem. About a month ago, 7 people were shot at Eureka Garden, including a 20-year-old mother of two.

The residents of Eureka Gardens have had to endure conditions like this for years, but now we are speaking together as one voice so that people can know what it's like to live there. I'm grateful for the public attention that our situation has received, but I know I speak for all of the residents when I say that what matters most to us are some real changes. Changes that help us live our lives without fear of crime or sickness. Changes that give our children a safe place to come home to after school.

I am here today because I want to make sure that we have better living conditions. I pray that if we are able to get a new owner, they will rebuild the apartments and make it better for the residents. Thank you for this opportunity.