

Overfull E. Oakland house shows plight of homeless

City decides to board up building that crams people into tiny spaces

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OAKLAND -- When word spread early this year that an East Oakland building had rooms for rent, it didn't take long for the homeless and working poor to show up.

After living for 90 days in a station wagon with her husband and five children, Christina Gomez was looking forward to putting a roof over her family. So she too found her way to the 24-room transitional housing facility at 2926 Foothill Blvd., once the site of a senior citizens complex.

But the family's housing nightmare wasn't over, she said in a recent interview. "Seven of us were in one small room because that's all they had. But we stayed in that room for four months until we got another room at the same building."

Now, because of zoning and code violations -- many due to neglected repairs and wear and tear from so many tenants in tiny rooms -- city officials have decided to board up the building on July 24.

There are so few affordable apartments in Oakland, officials say, that it is becoming common for homeless people and those with low incomes to enter into joint living arrangements in tiny spaces.

There have been so many people waiting for rooms in the Foothill Boulevard building that some hopefuls have camped in the living room. Others fill the attic, or a room that is always hot because it houses the water heater.

Last month, one tenant had to give up her room when she went to the hospital to give birth to twins. When she returned, the only space available in the building was on a sofa, said tenants. Child Protective Services placed one infant in foster care while the other remained in the hospital.

Eventually, 40 to 60 people -- half of them children under 18 -- would settle in, unable to find housing elsewhere in Oakland.

For Oakland's working poor and the homeless -- coping with rising rents and a tight housing market -- the ebb and flow at 2926 Foothill Blvd. is typical.

Seyoum "Joe" Kebede, who has owned the property for a year, said he plans to fix it up and then offer it to nonprofit groups interested in providing housing for the needy. He is critical of the city for failing to act sooner. "I needed help but the city just gave me the runaround, and said, 'Go to court.'"

He had problems dealing with a business owner who wanted to convert the building into a housing program for single women only, but soon the doors were opened to others willing to pay rent for small rooms. **Relocation help**

Kebede said if tenants can produce receipts showing they paid rent up to three months, he will give reimbursements to help with relocations. The deal came after a meeting with representatives from the East Bay Community Law Center in Berkeley -- which received complaints from tenants -- and the office of Oakland City Councilmember Ignacio De La Fuente (Fruitvale-San Antonio).

"There were just too many people living here, and more would come at night," said Kebede.

In March, according to Kebede, the building's leasing agent at Valva Realty of Oakland decided to allow Summer Reed-Agbabiaka to operate a housing program for single women at the building, which had been vacant for at least five years.

"The problem is a lot of people, not just single women, moved in illegally," said Kebede. "I had to pay \$7,500 to fix a drainage problem and that is part of the over \$30,000 (Reed-Agbabiaka) owes me for rent that was collected but never paid to Valva and for repairs."

Reed-Agbabiaka -- since evicted from the property by Valva Realty -- had run other "transitional housing" programs in Oakland, where the homeless were given temporary shelter until they secured permanent housing. Tenants say she has similar units in the suburbs.

She could not be reached for a comment about problems at the Foothill Boulevard site. However, last year, when other East Oakland tenants complained about their lodging at another Reed-Agbabiaka site in East Oakland, she said: "They are always late in paying rents and that's why I fall behind. ... I have lost a lot of money trying to be nice." **Code, zoning violations**

City housing inspectors said they were aware months ago of housing code and zoning violations at the Foothill Boulevard site. But they said they thought progress was being made.

Tenants said that when they moved in Reed-Agbabiaka asked them for their federal food stamps or WIC (Women Infant Children) money. The plan was for an on-site cook to buy the food and prepare meals for all the tenants.

However, tenants said they often did not get the three daily meals Reed-Agbabiaka promised, and the cupboards and refrigerator were often empty. Then a lock was put on the door to the kitchen area.

"She hired me to keep the bathrooms clean, and my husband (Anthony Harrington) was supposed to cook," said tenant Linda Van. "We have only been paid \$500 once since January."

"The toilets were always broken," tenant Dorcas Davis charged.

When the East Bay Community Law Center in Berkeley heard about the crowded conditions, attorney Sharon Djemal went to meet with tenants on June 1.

"This was a rip-off," she said. "There were a lot of children running around, and the rooms were very small. There was no food after people gave up their food stamps. People without food stamps had to give cash. The rents were between \$300 and \$800 a month. But this transitional housing program was not paying the owner of the building."

She said the house was not up to code.

"We are working with the owner, who is going out of his way to be nice," said Djemal. "People who have given us receipts for the rents from April, May and June will be reimbursed by him so they can have money to find other housing. But it's tough finding a place in Oakland."

For four months, Gomez and her family were all in one room. "Then we got two rooms," said Gomez. "The housing inspector and the fire department came and said they were too many people in these small rooms."

Now, Gomez, 35, who is four months pregnant, her husband, Reginald Leonard, and five children -- the youngest 8, the oldest 15 -- are ready to start looking for new housing. When they lived in the car, Gomez and Leonard did not have jobs. Now she works for the Oakland public schools but is not employed during the summer. He has a job at Oakland International Airport.

"I feel a lot better now after getting this letter from the lawyer," (about the rent reimbursement)," said Gomez. "This will make it easier for us to find a place."