



Rats, roaches and resilience: Cincinnati's public housing at a crossroads

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CINCINNATI -- When Mary Caldwell takes the elevator in her apartment tower, she sometimes sees bedbugs crawling on the residents riding with her.

A drip from her kitchen faucet was gushing water by the time a maintenance man came to fix it five months after she reported the problem. And that's not all.

"The smell, the bugs, the garbage chutes that we have are corroded and filthy," she said. "And when you open the door you have to literally look up and make sure there are not roaches that are going to drop on you and therefore you're going to carry that into your apartment."

Caldwell doesn't live in a building owned by some out-of-town investor that doesn't care about Cincinnati. She lives in The Redding, an apartment tower in Avondale owned and operated by Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority, more commonly known as CMHA.

WCPO spent much of 2017 investigating Cincinnati's public housing at what is a critical time for CMHA and its more than 10,000 tenants. We wanted to better understand communities that often are in the news only when crime has occurred there. These are places supported by our tax dollars. And even if you never expect to live in government-subsidized housing, you or someone you love might need it someday -- just like Caldwell did.

She worked from the time she was 16 and earned enough to buy her own house and two cars until an unsuccessful surgery sent her into a financial tailspin. Caldwell lost nearly everything.

As grateful as she is to have someplace to sleep at night, Caldwell is among a number of residents who spoke with WCPO about their frustrations with what they describe as deteriorating buildings, chronic pest problems and a lack of security that makes it easy for strangers with bad intentions to get into the towers they call home.

"They promise you a safe, clean environment. They advertise that they are a leader in housing in the community and they have gold-plus standards that they follow. No," said Caldwell, 59, who moved into The Redding in November 2016. "No. Noooooo."

Problems with public housing reach far beyond Cincinnati.

Public housing authorities across the country are struggling to maintain aging buildings with a shrinking supply of federal dollars for their upkeep.

Those agencies have found new hope in a federal program called Rental Assistance Demonstration, or RAD. RAD gives public housing authorities a way to access private dollars to repair roofs, plumbing and heating systems or even build new housing to replace the buildings that are falling apart. CMHA wants to convert all of its roughly 5,000 units of public housing to RAD so it can start using private funds to help make the estimated \$200 million in backlogged repairs that its properties need.

But RAD has tenants worried. Many aren't sure when or if they will have to move. And despite assurances from CMHA, they are skeptical about whether they will be able to go back to their apartments after renovations are completed.

"Where's the money coming from? It sounds like private owners coming in to own some of these buildings, but Metropolitan tells us they're going to maintain them and keep them up," said Delorise Calhoun, a resident of CMHA's San Marco apartments in Walnut Hills and president of the Jurisdiction-Wide Resident Advisory Board that represents tenants in discussions with CMHA. "A private owner could put me out tomorrow. I didn't rent from a private owner. I rented from CMHA."

WCPO focused its reporting on three CMHA properties: Two apartment towers in Avondale, The Redding and The President; and Stanley Rowe Towers in the West End. It's a small sample of the 22 communities that CMHA owns and manages. Still, see if you think those are places where you would want to live.

'Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs'

Stephen Sanders lives at The President apartment tower in Avondale where WCPO observed taped up ductwork, dirty hallways and a sewage backup outside a kitchen in the basement. Residents said the backup happens after every heavy rain, an assertion that CMHA denied.

The Redding in Avondale, where Caldwell lives, had problems with roaches and rats that went unresolved for more than five months in 2016, according to records from the Cincinnati Health Department.

And Stanley Rowe Towers in the West End has an apartment on the fourth floor with building code violations that have gone unabated for months. They include broken windows, damage from an unidentified leak and a fire door that doesn't latch properly, according to city inspection records.

"Not that I think I'm better than anybody, but I have lived better than this," said Sanders, who is 63 and moved to The President seven years ago after a series of strokes. "If my family knew what kind of spot this was, they would really be upset."

"We do a really good job of taking care of our properties for having so many," Johnson said, adding that CMHA has completed nearly 300,000 work orders over the past three years. "We're working very, very hard."

CMHA relies on residents to report problems in the properties, he said, and the agency has been addressing the problems within about 30 days of receiving complaints. When residents submit a work order, it remains in CMHA's internal system until the maintenance is performed, according to Lesley Wardlow, CMHA's senior communications coordinator.

Residents and their advocates disputed that.

“After 30 days, the work orders drop off,” said Nashid Shakir, project manager for the Jurisdiction-Wide Resident Advisory Board, or J-RAB. “It’s not because they’ve been addressed. It’s because they drop off.”

Stanley Rowe Towers resident Ras Y. Tafarl laughed at the notion of maintenance problems being fixed in a month.

“I got a drip,” he said, “it’s got a birthday coming up.”

Caldwell said after a maintenance man finally came to fix her leaky faucet, more than five months after she reported the problem, she told him he would have to seal the new faucet so it wouldn’t leak into the cabinet below.

“He said he didn’t have a work order for that,” she said.

“He only had a work order to fix the leak.”

So Caldwell, who is disabled, had to place a bowl under the sink to catch the water that leaks because the faucet wasn’t properly sealed. She regularly gets on her hands and knees to empty the bowl so the water doesn’t damage her cabinets.

Diane Irvin moved out of The Redding to stay with her adult daughters because she and her family were so worried about how the building was affecting her health. Before she moved, Irvin was president of the building’s Resident Advisory Board and heard about lots of tenants’ maintenance and pest problems.

“If I don’t move, I will be cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs,” she said about a month before she left. “I’m not getting well ever. It’s like a nightmare to me.”

Robert Kidd said he worries most about the way older tenants are impacted by the problems in his building.

Kidd moved into The President about eight years ago after his divorce. The elevators at the building break routinely, he said, and there are residents on the sixth and seventh floors who use wheelchairs and feel stuck whenever that happens.

Wardlow countered that CMHA contracts with Thyssenkrupp Elevators to provide 24-hour repair service to all its buildings and ensures that residents who are confined to wheelchairs “are not placed in jeopardy.”

“I’m not going to get Biblical,” Kidd said. “But everybody needs to pray to make a change.”

Tenants told WCPO they understand CMHA’s money problems, but many questioned whether the agency is spending the money it has where it matters most.

Public housing resident Robert Kidd outside of The President. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

“Only thing they’re cleaning up is the outside of the buildings,” Calhoun said. “When you go into the buildings on the inside, they’re horrible.”

Wardlow said that’s not the case. In a response to WCPO’s questions, she wrote that CMHA “expends its limited resources in the manner that is fiscally responsible, which includes all appropriate maintenance responsibilities. CMHA in no way expends more of its budget to address landscaping rather than addressing items that are building maintenance items.”

But even if you believe the buildings are broken, that doesn’t mean the people who live there are.

‘I chose to stay here’

CMHA tenants are mothers and fathers, grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles. The average annual income of a CMHA household is \$9,855.31, but that doesn’t define them.

“I have to explain all the time that subsidized housing does not mean sub-educated or sub-knowledgeable because my finances have nothing to do with my intelligence,” said Luwana Pettus-Oglesby, 58, a resident of Stanley Rowe Towers in the West End who also is president of the Resident Advisory Board at one of the towers there.

She moved to Stanley Rowe about six years ago after earning a culinary degree at Cincinnati State. She was working seasonal jobs at both Great American Ball Park and Paul Brown Stadium at the time.

“It just made more sense to me to live close enough to work so I wouldn’t have to drive so far,” she said. “And if the car happened to die, I could catch transit.”

Pettus-Oglesby quit the seasonal jobs for a position at Jack Cincinnati Casino but left after a conflict there. She has owned her own catering business called Mama Lu’s since late 2006.

Luwana Pettus-Oglesby, resident at Stanley Rowe Towers. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

“Just before I left the casino, I was paying ceiling rent (the highest rent level), and I still chose to stay here,” she said. “But the advantage is, when my income changed, so did my rental amount.”

Vida Manuel, 57, chose Stanley Rowe for its location, too. She grew up in public housing in part of the old Laurel Homes community that is now part of City West.

She remembers when Linn Street had a bike shop and a clothing store, a deli and an ice cream shop. She remembers the swimming pool and the community basketball games.

“There were a lot of things you could go and do and not get in trouble,” she said. “And then of course everything changed and moved.”

When Manuel lost her baggage-handling job at the airport, she worked at nearby DHL for a while. But that didn’t last. She ended up homeless, having to stay with her daughters, until she got into Stanley Rowe.

She’s been a cashier at Meijer for more than a year and serves as treasurer of the Stanley Rowe Resident Advisory Board. Like Pettus-Oglesby, she’s working to launch her own business. It’s called Collective

Visions Management. Manuel has taken a general construction class and got certified in painting, too. Eventually, she wants her company to be able to handle janitorial work, landscaping and property management, perhaps even working for CMHA.

She and Pettus-Oglesby both have gotten assistance from the J-RAB ROSS Business Service & Coordination Center, located on the second floor of Stanley Rowe.

Vida Manuel, a longtime resident at the Stanley Rowe Towers. Emily Maxwell | WCPO
The center's mission is to help CMHA residents get the training and information they need to get jobs and start their own businesses. CMHA has been providing the center with space, rent-free.

Tafarl got help through the center, too, and now works as its IT consultant. He hopes the experience will help his Ras I.T. Consulting business get more customers.

The center has helped more than three dozen residents get their businesses certified, said Peter Block, an author and expert on community building who has been working with J-RAB to figure out what skills and talents CMHA residents have that they could turn into businesses.

"It's a shift in thinking," Block said. "When you call somebody incapable for long enough, they begin to believe you."

The goal of the business center is "to help residents help each other," Shakir said. Some tenants have won major contracts with CMHA, and they are helping other residents navigate the complicated bidding process.

The mission defies what Johnson said could be the most common misperception about people who live in public housing: That they're lazy.

"They are hard-working people," Johnson said of his agency's tenants.

CMHA supports its residents through programs that go beyond housing and promote self-sufficiency, partnering with more than 35 different organizations to "uplift families and the community," Wardlow noted.

But a significant number of CMHA tenants cannot work full-time for one reason or another, Johnson said.

"A lot of them have retired. Some have gotten sick," he said. "A large portion (34 percent) of our residents have disabilities."

Calhoun said those tenants who can't work for whatever reason are among the most concerned about what will happen to them under the Rental Assistance Demonstration program, or RAD.

'Huge imperative' to save public housing

To understand why RAD is so critical for CMHA, it's important to know how public housing authorities get their money.

Under federal law, public housing authorities have only two ways to get money to maintain and operate public housing: from the rent that tenants pay and from the federal government.

Tenants typically pay about 30 percent of their low incomes for rent. That doesn't generate a lot of money.

A duct taped pipe in the laundry room of The President. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

And, with the exception of stimulus money that was funneled to improve public housing after the Great Recession, Congress has been allocating less and less money each year for public housing, according to figures compiled by the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

CMHA estimates it has been "shorted" about \$13 million over the past 10 years, said Johnson, the agency's CEO.

"The biggest challenge that we have here is funding," he said. "Trying to manage within the parameters of the financial dollars that you're getting and then sometimes not knowing what you're going to get is very challenging."

Public housing authorities are landlords, after all, said Stephen Green, chief operating officer and chief investment officer of New York-based NHP Foundation, an affordable housing developer. And the authorities incur the same expenses that other landlords do.

"They have no control any more than any other landlord over the cost of their expenses," Green said. "Yet their revenue is fluctuating arbitrarily."

Enter RAD.

Started as a demonstration project during the Obama administration, RAD aims to preserve public housing by helping housing authorities get the money they need to repair their aging buildings, said Alex Schwartz, a professor at The New School Milano School of International Affairs, Management and Urban Policy in New York City.

The program allows housing authorities to borrow money and use low-income housing tax credits to generate the millions of dollars they need for upgrades or replacement buildings, he said.

Under RAD, buildings owned by housing authorities go from being public housing to becoming buildings that get "project-based rental assistance," more commonly known as Section 8, a program that has received more reliable financial support from Congress over the years, Schwartz said.

Unfortunately, RAD doesn't work for properties that are too dilapidated to be repaired, he said. And if Congress were to slash funding for project-based rental assistance, the whole program would collapse, he said.

But right now, it's a critical strategy for preserving public housing across the U.S., said Carolina Reid, an assistant professor of city and regional planning at the University of California, Berkeley College of Environmental Design.

“Public housing in this country has been so chronically underfunded that we’re losing about 15,000 units a year,” she said.

The push around the country to increase affordable housing does little good when public housing becomes so damaged that it must be demolished, she said.

“There’s a huge imperative to actually save the public housing units we have and make sure they’re livable,” she said.

That’s what CMHA aims to do with RAD, Johnson said.

The agency is working through the complex federal process to convert all its public housing to RAD. CMHA doesn’t yet know which buildings will be converted first or who might have to move or when it would all happen.

But the federal rules for RAD guarantee “one to one replacement,” so every unit that gets renovated or demolished will be replaced by another one, Schwartz said. The rules also don’t allow new “screening,” he said.

“Anyone who is a legitimate public housing tenant on the lease is allowed to be in the program under RAD,” he said.

‘You just never know’

CMHA tenants remain skeptical because many have heard it all before.

Programs in the past designed to improve public housing have meant displacement, said John Schrider, director of the Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio.

Legal Aid has been representing J-RAB and the Resident Advisory Board presidents in their discussions and negotiations with CMHA.

“Just about everybody in public housing knows somebody or knows somebody who knows somebody who lived in the West End before City West was done,” Schrider said. “Everybody was supposed to have a chance to come back and live in renovated City West, and one in 10 did.”

That history, he said, makes it difficult for tenants to trust the promises that everything will be fine.

The local uncertainty is exacerbated by changes in Washington, D.C., where it’s unclear how much the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s budget will be cut and what that will mean for funding for public housing authorities. HUD Secretary Ben Carson has expressed support for RAD, but experts that follow the program closely still are waiting for details.

“The real question is do we care about affordable housing? Do we think everybody should have decent housing? And right now, the answer is not so much,” Schrider said. “And that’s really what this is about.” Legal Aid’s goal is to help residents work with CMHA in a way that RAD is successful, he said, so that tenants end up in better housing and promises are kept.

For now, CMHA continues to work through the complicated federal process for RAD. And leaders of the Resident Advisory Boards continue to advocate for better maintenance and security in the buildings where they live.

“A lot of residents here are afraid to speak up,” Kidd said.

That’s why Sanders does his part, he said, complaining to CMHA when he must and keeping an eye on the trouble that happens at the Burton Avenue apartment buildings near the President that he can see from his fourth-floor window.

“I don’t really feel safe, but I’m not afraid,” Sanders said. “I did want to move. But I didn’t want to go to something worse or just as bad. And you just never know.”