

The Long Wait For Affordable Housing

By Natalie Devlin
Editorial Intern

“The D.C. government can solve the housing crisis!” Elizabeth Falcon, Housing for All campaign organizer, shouted to the congregation of homeless advocates at a Lamont Park affordable housing teach-in.

She and other activists took the stage June 24 with calls to city officials to respond to the need for more affordable housing. During in-depth issue discussions, panelists stressed they see the real antagonist of affordable housing as gentrification. Affordable housing projects do not make as much money for developers as luxury housing or commercial projects.

Another consequence of the gentrification has been the loss of shelters in Northwest Washington in recent years.

Advocates spoke of the 2010 closure of La Casa, a bilingual homeless shelter in Columbia Heights that was bulldozed to make way for upscale development at a prime location on Irving Street, next to the Columbia Heights Metro station. La Casa which housed 90 people a night for more than 20 years, had been opened in response to an influx of Spanish-speaking people in the area who needed emergency shelter.

They also recalled the 2008 closing of the Franklin School shelter, located in an historic 19th century school building on Franklin Square Park in Northwest Washington. The building, which formerly provided emergency shelter beds to men, has not been remodeled for other use; it lies vacant. Homeless advocates, including public interest lawyer Jane Zara have fought to get the shelter reopened.

Zara, who attended the teach-in, said policymakers pit permanent supportive housing advocates against homeless advocates but Zara stresses she sees both as important. Shelters and affordable housing are necessarily linked, she said, and need to coexist.

Advocates did credit the city council

for its work to increase the availability to affordable housing through inclusionary zoning, which requires all new housing developments to include some affordable housing units. However, it was not until December 27, 2010, after the closing of the two shelters that inclusionary zoning took effect.

Advocates said Former Mayor Adrian Fenty stalled the law. Ward 1 City Council member Jim Graham agreed in an interview. “The problem was, the mayor was moving very slowly on implementing the law,” he said.

Last year’s annual report of IZ showed no new units and only two projects currently underway. Elinor Hart, from the Housing for All campaign, said at the teach-in that the impact of the law might be seen next year.

Graham too said he is optimistic about the impact that IZ can have on the community.

“We think it’s a very important part of the city’s arsenal of tools to deal with affordable housing,” he said.

The Department of Housing and Community Development now oversees IZ, but the mayor still holds some responsibilities such as advertising the units. The District of Columbia Housing Authority is in charge of placing qualifying residents into the units.

Housing Authority Director of Public Affairs Dena Michaelson said that about 60,000 people are on the waiting list for affordable housing, all trying to get one of the 8,000 units for public housing or one of the 12,000 units of subsidized housing. Waiting time varies. The list of 60,000 names reflects everyone who has applied in recent years. The housing authority periodically reviews the list and ranks the applicants according to need. Applicants who are homeless or rent-burdened (paying more than half their income on rent) or live in an unlivable home are given the first priority. But getting into the pool does not mean that you will have a house tomorrow; you have to wait for one to open up.

“If you are in a pool for a three-bed-

room apartment, I can’t tell you if it will be a month or a year,” Michaelson said

The housing authority is well aware of the increased demand for housing. Michaelson said that the agency has doubled the number of Section 8-subsidized housing vouchers since 2000, but it has not been enough to keep up with the demand. Since the economic crash in 2008, the government has been overwhelmed with people looking for help.

The will is present in government officials and activists. The only problem is finding a way for everything to come together to better serve the community. The question remains: Can the government solve the housing crisis?

BACKGROUND PHOTO: ADVOCATE ELIZABETH FALCON

Cobey McLaughlin is born with no place to call home. His mother, Jennifer, takes refuge at Missionaries of Charity’s Queen of Peace emergency shelter for pregnant women. She says someone stole her newborn’s can of milk. A complaint to the staff leaves her turned out of the shelter. Jennifer and Cobey roam the streets looking for money for hotel rooms.

Six months after the baby is born, McLaughlin finds an affordable housing arrangement thanks to the National Coalition for the Homeless. “If it wasn’t for the National Coalition, I’d probably still be on the street,” she says.

McLaughlin has two more children, no longer living with her. When they left, her Section 8 voucher followed; it was for families. She gets another voucher that applies only to a specific site on Mississippi Avenue, which she says is in a violent neighborhood. If all goes as planned, she hopes to move to another site after a year.

Housing Woes

By Reginald Black, Vendor

Ask any inner city resident why so many people are moving away or becoming homeless here in Washington, and they will say that housing is our biggest issue.

Leaks and other advocates from all over the region collaborated at the teach-in picnic to place residents in direct contact with information about Washington’s housing woes. The situation looks grim. The city still has thousands of people on a waiting list for federal and locally subsidized Section 8 housing.

“We are entitled to affordable housing,” said Keith Silver, an Advisory Neighborhood Commission participant. Yet he said he has become disillusioned with the workings of developers and and thinks of affordable housing as “an illusion, a mirage and a trick.”

A family of four making minimum wage cannot afford housing in this city, said participant Johnny Barnes who described situations where low-income residents were forced to move out of a property for remodeling and were promised affordable housing, only to see luxury apartments or condos replace their homes.

“Developers have no commitment to our neighborhoods or our city,” Barnes concluded angrily.

Thanh Hoang applies for affordable housing. Living shelter-to-shelter for the past 15-20 years, he wants a stable living situation. Hoang has a severe mental illness, causing him to hear voices in his head. He lived in a Green Door community-based mental health center for five years but left to find more independence.

