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HUD

'The No. 1 worst in the United States'

By Jay Bachhuber and Samara Smith Tuesday, Jun 27 2006

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"HUD is the No. 1 worst landlord, I believe, in the United States," says Michele Byrd, a man who resides in the decaying carcass of an SRO at 524 West 150th Street. His landlord is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the federal agency mandated by law to improve the housing stock.

Byrd's building has mice crawling through gaping holes in its walls, bare plywood floors, and until recently, no working refrigerators or stoves. With its dim halls, leaking ceilings, and decrepit stairways, it looks like a crack house, and until the dealers left last June, it was one. HUD has owned Byrd's building since August 2004, and a simple tally of its 97 housing-code violations belies the extent of its wreckage.

His bathroom is overgrown with mold, and he didn't have running water for months. In the third-floor hallway a mouse has lain decaying on a chemical trap for weeks. Byrd says the management firm retained by HUD has made some improvements, such as recently providing him with a filthy refrigerator and a stove that belches smoke when a burner is turned on. But it's not just the traditional service failings of most bad landlords that have drawn the ire of tenant advocates about HUD. The federal agency has taken unprecedented actions to remove the people who live with these conditions: no-cause evictions.

In fact, it took a federal judge to dam the flood of these evictions, in a decision unnoticed by the local press. Hundreds of low-income tenants who had lived in buildings like Byrd's for years—and had depended on bargain-basement rents to survive—were simply told they had 30 days to get out. In court this spring, the tenants' lawyers argued that these eviction notices were unconstitutional and violated HUD's regulations.

"I'm telling you right now," Federal District Court Judge Frederic Block ruled in March, "that HUD will not go forward to seek to enforce the no-cause clause against anyone else, so I'm going to give you a formal order to take you off the hook. If they do that they will have to be subject to contempt proceedings. Does that make it clear?" Judge Block's home-saving injunction was only temporary, however. He's reviewing the legal issues and is expected to render a final decision in the coming months.

HUD spokesman Adam Glantz says the agency brought eviction proceedings against 262



photo: Jay Bachhuber

Stagnant water behind 306 Troutman Street in Brooklyn, where Nicholas Diaz's daughter Carmen Perez lives in a building owned by HUD

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