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Tenants sue Joliet to keep Evergreen Housing Project

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By BOB OKON Staff writer

JOLIET -- Tenants at Evergreen Terrace have joined the legal fight between the city and owners of the low-income housing project.

The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law announced Thursday that it has filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of Evergreen Terrace tenants who want to preserve the 356-unit housing complex.

The lawsuit takes the side of ownership group New West, which, with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has been in a long legal battle with the city of Joliet.

The city wants to condemn and demolish the federally subsidized housing project, contending that it has long been in disrepair and attracts crime.

The tenants' lawsuit alleges the city's efforts are racially motivated and violate federal law, according a statement issued by the Sargent Shriver Center.

A large number of residents at Evergreen Terrace are minorities.

Housing availability

Resident Teresa Davis said she and others wouldn't have any place else to go if the complex were torn down.

"I think this property is extremely vital because it gives young mothers and young women and young men, too, a stepping stone into becoming independent," she said.

Davis is the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit named Teresa Davis v. the City of Joliet.

Davis and the Chicago Rehab Network, which has joined the cause to save Evergreen Terrace, contend the complex is being renovated and should be preserved for low-income people who need rental housing.

"We want to have rental housing available to people," said Kevin Jackson, executive director of the Chicago Rehab Network. "We need to have more of it -- not less."

Complex a 'blight'

City officials, however, say that the complex remains in disrepair.

"It's surprising that residents of such a filthy and dangerous slum would sue the city, which has fought for years to eliminate this blight and relocate the residents to safe, sanitary and secure housing," said James Shapard, deputy city manager for Joliet.

City Attorney Jeff Plyman said the tenants' lawsuit, including the charge of racial motivation, repeats allegations previously made by New West in litigation with the city.

"It's obviously in full cooperation and orchestration with the ownership of Evergreen Terrace," Plyman said.

He said the property still does not measure up to city building codes and has had a host of other problems.

"You have everything from open drug dealing to destruction of property and human waste in the hallways," he said.

Aside from the local issues, the city's legal fight with New West could have national consequences.

Jackson said affordable housing advocates are concerned that more cities would try to get rid of subsidized housing complexes if Joliet's condemnation effort is successful.

"It's so precedent-setting," he said. "People have been watching this across the country."

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