



SHRIVER CENTER


Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

CHICAGO REHAB NETWORK

53 WEST JACKSON BLVD.
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60604

FACSIMILE:
312.663.3562

TELEPHONE:
312.663.3936



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www.chicagorehab.org
www.povertylaw.org

CRN Contact: Richard Muhammad
312-773-616-5058 (cell)

Shriver Center Contact: Kate Walz
312-263-3830 ext. 232
773-539-1309 (home)
katewalz@povertylaw.org

LOW-INCOME TENANTS SUE THE CITY OF JOLIET FOR RACE DISCRIMINATION & SEEK A VOICE IN THE CONDEMNATION ACTION

Tenant leaders, families working to rebuild community
as federal court decides the fate of their homes

In a federal lawsuit filed in Chicago, *Teresa Davis v. the City of Joliet*, low-income tenants at Evergreen Terrace, a federally subsidized housing development in Joliet, Illinois allege that the City of Joliet's effort to condemn Evergreen Terrace is racially motivated and in violation of federal law.

The tenants are represented by the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law. The tenants have also filed a motion seeking to intervene in a suit already pending in the federal courts, in which the City of Joliet is seeking to take Evergreen Terrace by eminent domain and displace Evergreen Terrace families. The tenants would be joining the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and the owners of Evergreen Terrace in their opposition of the Joliet's attempt to take the property by eminent domain. If the City's efforts are successful, the tenants of Evergreen Terrace, many of whom are seniors or families with children, could lose their ability to stay in their historic community.

Evergreen Terrace, located across the river from Harrah's Casino and near downtown Joliet, Ill., is a project-based Section 8 development that allows low-income families to afford decent and safe housing. The low-income tenants should not be pushed out of a community and their

housing just as it has improved. The lawsuit was filed Dec. 21 and the first status hearing before a federal judge will be held January 4, 2008.

“Evergreen Terrace is a vital part of the Joliet community,” said Teresa Davis, a 26-year-old resident. “As a mother of four children, I know what a valuable resource this housing can be for young mothers.”

Tenant leaders and residents at Evergreen Terrace have been working hard to improve the community. From recent security improvements on the property to strong resident engagement and support from advocacy groups, residents are hoping real changes at the 356-unit housing complex will be noted and their voices will be heard as a federal judge ponders whether the place they call home should stay open.

“We have been actively engaged with housing officials, and the owners and managers of Evergreen Terrace to ensure we have a safe, clean and decent place to live,” said Helen Dirkens, a eight-year resident of the complex. The senior citizen, who is a grandmother and disabled, lives on a fixed income and like other residents cannot afford to move. Evergreen Terrace is one of the few remaining affordable family housing options in Joliet and in Will County. Not living in Joliet would uproot residents from needed services and opportunities, like jobs, health care and schools.

Tenant organizing and partnering with affordable housing experts, such as the Chicago Rehab Network, to make sure security and physical improvements occur has paid off. New equipment has been installed and new security procedures are in place.

“We can speak for ourselves and in our own interest. We need to stay in our homes and we are making a direct appeal to the court in this case. We believe that we should be heard because closing Evergreen Terrace will put out in the street,” said Dirkens.

“The effort to demolish Evergreen Terrace is a political maneuver. Government agencies agreed it should be repaired and preserved. The Department of Housing and Urban Development had the Illinois Housing Development Authority investigate this situation and provide recommendations. IHDA thoroughly examined this case and concluded preservation was the proper course of action. These families should not be displaced,” said Kevin Jackson, of the Chicago Rehab Network, an affordable housing advocacy group that has worked with residents since 2002. The political leader, Congressman Jerry Weller (R-Ill.), who pushed for the demolition is leaving office, improvements have been made and we have a chance for a new beginning, he added. A HUD-approved 27-year affordable housing contract puts \$2.7 million into the property, with about \$1 million spent in initial improvements.

The Chicago Rehab Network (CRN) provides technical assistance, promotes affordable housing policies in Illinois and was founded in 1977. Its membership consists of over 40 housing organizations representing over 60 neighborhoods. Visit www.chicagorehab.org for more information.

The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, a national resource, champions law and policy promoting equal opportunity and support for low-income individuals, families, and communities so that they can escape poverty permanently.