



LOS ANGELES

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Lax Enforcement Keeps Slumlords from Cleaning Up Act

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A toddler wakes up with a cockroach lodged in his ear. Cat-sized rats chew through the feeding tubes of a young girl with cystic fibrosis. Conga lines of roaches parade through a house in broad daylight. Leaky pipes and constant moisture breed vast colonies of mold. Inadequately maintained plumbing backs up, causing overflows of sewage. Lead paint chips and flakes, exposing children to lead dust. Walls, ceilings and floors are in severe disrepair - even to the point of collapse.

It is unfathomable that we allow slum housing in 21st century Los Angeles. But we do.

An estimated 48,000 people in Los Angeles get sick each year from living in slum conditions. Slum housing devastates the health and economy of entire neighborhoods. Too often, our children are the canaries in the mine that force us to recognize slum conditions only after it is too late. How well will a child do in school if she is being bitten by rats in the middle of the night? Who pays for the emergency room visits of a young boy whose asthma attacks are triggered by roaches, mold, or lack of heat? Who bears the cost of brain damage to a baby with lead poisoning? How often must parents stay home from work to care for themselves or their children who are sick because of slum conditions?

Despite the devastation caused by slum housing, the last major policy improvements in Los Angeles occurred in

the late 1990s. Following news stories exposing the horrors of local slum housing, Inner City Law Center - where I work - convened a Blue Ribbon Citizens' Committee on Slum Housing, consisting of prominent business and nonprofit leaders. The committee recognized that "a primary goal of housing code enforcement should be timely and effective intervention to prevent standard housing from becoming slum or abandoned housing." It recommended "routine, periodic inspections of all rental housing, with the frequency and intensity of inspection determined by the conditions of the building and estimates of the risk of deterioration."

The city adopted many of the committee's recommendations and implemented a more proactive housing code enforcement system. As a result, much progress has been made in the past decade. Government inspections and enforcement have increased. Private lawsuits also regularly force slumlords to pay multimillion-dollar settlements to their tenants and to take proper care of their buildings. But despite these successes, numerous slumlords in Los Angeles continue to get rich from their criminal behavior.

Hopefully, the recent coverage of the despicable business practices of a particularly notorious slumlord here in Los Angeles will prompt another burst of attention and reform. It may be time to convene another Blue Ribbon Citizens' Committee, which could detail the tougher prosecution, more vigorous code enforcement and targeted legislation that is desperately needed. In order to end slum housing in Los Angeles, we must demand changes.

First and foremost, we must insist that slumlords be sent to jail for their criminal behavior. Even slumlords who are cited for thousands (yes, thousands!) of health and safety violations are rarely incarcerated. As former City Attorney Ira Reiner said, "We aren't talking about landlords who are just in over their heads, unable to maintain a building properly. ... We are talking about men in the slum business. Men who buy slums and maintain slums. ... People who deal in blood money." Living in slum housing can be so devastating to one's health that the term "blood money" is unfortunately accurate. And slum housing does not just impact those who live in it.

As Justice William O. Douglas put it so eloquently in 1954 for a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court, in *Berman v. Parker*, 348 U.S. 26 (1954), "The misery of housing may despoil a community as an open sewer may ruin a river." Given the gravity of the harms that slum housing causes to the health, safety and economy of our communities, we must insist that prosecutors and judges treat slumlords as criminals who deserve substantial financial penalties and jail time.

Slumlords should be forced to fix underlying and pervasive problems by making high-quality repairs. Too often housing inspectors allow slumlords to pass city inspections with Mickey Mouse repairs such as painting over mold or replacing drywall rather than fixing leaking pipes.

In January, half of an apartment building collapsed in Koreatown despite the fact that housing inspectors had signed off on the building just nine months earlier. Although it is not yet established for certain, it seems most likely that the

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owner's cosmetic repairs allowed the building to pass inspection without the owner addressing the underlying water leaks and structural damage that led to the collapse. We must demand a more rigorous inspection process that does not permit slumlords to pass inspection with mere superficial repairs.

We must demand new laws that make it unprofitable to be a slumlord. Slumlords are sophisticated business people. Their business model involves collecting rent and paying little-to-nothing for building maintenance. As they milk buildings for rents, the buildings deteriorate with devastating consequences for residents and neighbors. The model is very lucrative - but only so long as the chances of being caught and the penalties if they are caught remain minimal. In order to make this business model unprofitable, we need laws that require owners to purchase appropriate insurance, that make landlords pay treble damages, and that enable courts to transfer ownership of slums to responsible owners.

The first slum housing case that I worked on involved a building with no heat and where most windows had been nailed shut. Leaky pipes produced massive amounts of moisture and lots of mold. Living conditions were so horrible that a baby died from respiratory failure. It is criminal that anyone is permitted to profit from such devastation. I look forward to a day when we do not allow such horrible conditions to exist in Los Angeles.

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