

Oakland sues landlord over blighted units

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By Cecily Burt, STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND – An absentee landlord has been sued by the city for making her tenants live in dilapidated, unhealthy apartments rife with rat, mouse and roach infestations, broken toilets, broken heaters, and no hot or cold running water, among other problems.

The civil lawsuit was filed in Alameda County Superior Court last week as a last resort against Elizabeth Ann Williams of Gilroy on behalf of more than four dozen tenants in 13 properties, most in West Oakland and North Oakland. Williams repeatedly ignored orders by city inspectors to make suitable repairs, and let the buildings decay into uninhabitable condition, said Ethan Nasr, an attorney working for the **Neighborhood Law Corps**, a division of the Oakland City Attorney's Office.

The blighted condition of the properties and Williams' failure to secure vacant units also has drawn drug dealers and other criminal activities to the apartments, making other tenants and neighbors suffer as a result, Nasr said.

"All of her properties have had a history of building code violations and a lot of them are high on the list (compiled by police) of properties needing maintenance and surveillance," Nasr said.

The properties are located on 24th, 27th, 37th and 39th streets, Mead Avenue, Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Harrison Street, Apgar Street and 72nd Avenue. Some, like two structures on Mead Avenue, are vacant, with the windows and doors boarded over.

For Councilmember Nancy Nadel (Downtown-West Oakland), whose office has fielded complaints about Williams for years, the conditions on one-block-long Mead Avenue, where two homicides have occurred the past two years, "were the straw that broke the camel's back."

"The ones on Mead are of great concern because the street has so many other problems as well," Nadel said. "But all her properties are problematic pretty much.

"She's been difficult to find, let alone get her to agree to something or sign a compliance plan," Nadel said. "Then she finally signed a compliance plan but never acted on it. It's been one elongated disaster after another, so we're finally suing her."

Williams denied Thursday her properties are in disrepair and said she had worked quickly with the city's building department to make repairs.

She said that squatters had taken over some of the vacant buildings despite her best efforts to secure them. She said that some of the problems listed in the lawsuit — and depicted in pictures displayed by the City Attorney's Office — occurred in vacant buildings where squatters had broken in.

"They are squatters, of course they don't have electricity and water, they aren't supposed to be there," she said.

Williams said many of her low-income tenants "love her" and they have lived in her buildings for many years with few, if any problems. As soon as they complain about something, it gets fixed, she said.

"When I rent out an apartment, it's in a condition that I would live in, and I have lived in some of them," Williams said.

Williams, who lives in Gilroy, said she was a victim of identity theft earlier this year and was not receiving her mail. When she found out the city attorney wanted to talk to her, she met with Nasr and immediately took out permits to correct some outstanding issues. She said the building department has signed off, and the

problems listed in the lawsuit "do not exist." She said she is not perfect, but when she knows about problems, she does her best to respond.

"We get calls from time to time about backed up plumbing and such, but we fix it," she said. "But when you have filth inside of the units, when you have a filthy stove, how did I do that?"

Some neighbors on Mead who try hard to keep their homes and yards neat and clean, wonder why it took the city so long, since everybody has been aware of the problems for years.

"It was a big problem at one time, with drug dealers and such," said Donald, who did not want to use his last name, as he installed a new lock on a pristine, two-story house nearby. "We don't need those type of properties around here. When did they file the lawsuit? Today? How long does it take?"

The lawsuit seeks a civil penalty of at least \$500,000 and asks that the court order Williams to abate the nuisance or pay the city to do the work.