

Dorchester Reporter

Dorchester, Mattapan tenants have had it with landlord who lets them live in squalor

By
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Waldeck Street resident Darcell Hines (center) speaks at an anti-displacement protest outside an apartment sanctioned for poor living conditions. Jennifer Smith photo

Mice, cockroaches, mold, shut-off heat, no electricity, jammed doors, open gasoline canisters. This is what we live with, said the tenants of several dilapidated Dorchester and Mattapan properties as they loudly protested on Monday evening week against the ownership of a notably negligent landlord, Uwa Lawrence.

“One, two, three, four. No more constables at our door. Five, six, seven, eight. Don’t evict, negotiate,” they chanted outside Lawrence’s property at 91-101 Waldeck St. amidst an array of colorful signs emblazoned with the words “People Before Profit” and “Stand Up! Fight Back.”

The tenants and members of the advocacy group City Life-Vida Urbana demanded a responsible sale of the properties to landlords who would maintain habitable and affordable conditions.

Lawrence, who also managed properties at 25-31-35 Orlando St. in Mattapan, declared bankruptcy this week. Several of his other properties had already been placed into receivership, and the remainder are now under the jurisdiction of a trustee appointed by the bankruptcy court.

Darcell Hines has lived in one of Lawrence's Waldeck Street properties for the past year and a half, with terrible conditions throughout. "I had to fight back," she told the Reporter after the protest, leg in a cast and leaning on a cane. "He pushed to try to evict me out of my apartment, and I wasn't going anywhere."

Last week, Inspectional Services Commissioner William Christopher said that on June 11 the Orlando Street housing complex was cited for 10 ISD violations that needed to be corrected within 24 hours. "It's been an ongoing thing with this particular landlord," said Christopher.

"We've tried for over a year and a half now to really work with him to make things right. Public Housing and the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership called us, and everybody was starting to get really anxious about this because the quality of the living environment was not good."

Monique Hinton has lived in one of the 24 units on Orlando Street for the past five years. At the protest on Monday, she said that Lawrence was "so disrespectful" in demanding to be let into her apartment just before she left for the evening. She continued: "I am tired of it. Just because I have Section 8 doesn't mean I don't have a right to live comfortably. It's not fair. It's not right."

An inter-agency city of Boston inspection team was guaranteed access to eight tenants' apartments on Orlando Street, Christopher said, and on a single inspection day 50 violations were noted across the agencies.

One of the electrical rooms in the building was loaded with debris and oil tanks; a refrigerator that had to be crow-barred open sat in the backyard; smoke detectors were missing or disabled throughout the building; the structure was rodent-infested; doors to some apartments were stuck and impassable, leaving inspectors to talk with residents through cracked entryways.

"Some of the things in the common areas, some of the things in the units, we thought were flat-out dangerous," Christopher said. But Inspectional Services and other Boston housing officials generally prefer not to take such extreme measures as bringing landlords into housing court and instating receiverships, he said.

"We've had an awful lot of success dealing with an awful lot of landlords about communicating that 'This is what our expectations are, This is the way we interpret the code. Is there something we can help you with?' " said Christopher. "And most of them are really, really cooperative and willing to work with us. In this particular case, we're not getting the cooperation that we would anticipate, so we're using whatever other vehicles we can."

Lauren Song, a lawyer with Greater Boston Legal Services, briefly took the megaphone on Monday to explain the legal status of the tenants.

The landlord is in a Chapter 11 bankruptcy, she said, with a case trustee assigned to manage his properties. "That means that he does not have any authorization to do anything relating to the properties, whether it be collecting your rent, or making repairs, et cetera," she added. The legal team represents "a large number" of Lawrence's tenants from his various properties during the bankruptcy proceeding, Song said.

Among the subjects being explored are maintaining the affordable housing designation for the properties, as many of the tenants use housing vouchers and subsidies, she said. "And if you have started looking for alternative housing you will find that there is very, very little to move into in the Greater Boston area," she noted.

But Massachusetts housing policy is very tenant friendly, she added. Without a final order from the court, "no one can move you out of your home," she said, to whoops from the assembled crowd.

City Life-Vida Urbana and the tenants hope that a non-profit will purchase the properties from the trustee. They warned against any landlords who may be interested in turning a profit from unlivable conditions or flipping the apartments at the expense of those living inside them.

Waldeck Street has been William Bautista's home for his entire 41 years. "I came from the hospital to the apartment," he said. "I don't feel that I should go anywhere."