

Nabe groups battle to save affordable apartments

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Decrepit apartments and cramping are a common trend among the city's immigrant families struggling to afford housing, particularly in gentrifying neighborhoods.

In a city that is losing about 60,000 affordable units a year, everyone in New York is feeling the pinch, but immigrant communities can be a little more vulnerable, affordable housing advocates said.

"In some immigrant communities, tenants are more vulnerable to being pushed out illegally because they may fear being reported to the authorities or they may be unfamiliar with the rules," said Tom Waters, Housing Policy Analyst, for the Community Service Society, a anti-poverty group.

Landlords have been known to charge exorbitant fees or allow units to rot to force out low-income immigrant tenants so they can boost the rent for new tenants, advocates said.

Neighborhood groups are on the front lines in the battle to retain affordable housing, tackling the threats in New York's historically immigrant neighborhoods by buying up buildings, confronting corporate landlords and educating tenants about their rights.

Here's a look at how three neighborhoods are dealing with the problem.

El Barrio

Filiberto Hernandez, 34, has had to wait months for his leaky bathroom ceiling to be repaired. He said he fights his landlord, but some of his neighbors do not know their rights and end up moving out.

"The landlords are rich, multi-millionaires, and then there are many poor people in El Barrio without resources," Hernandez said.

Landlords in East Harlem have been trying to force their low income, immigrant tenants out by letting apartments fall apart and later charging higher rents in the gentrifying neighborhood, advocates said.

For the past four years, Movement for Justice in El Barrio has fought one particular landlord, forcing him to repair hundreds of units in 47 East Harlem buildings before he sold the properties last year. Now the group,

comprised of about 400 tenants, is battling the units' new owner, Dawnay, Day Group.

Movement for Justice recently sued Dawnay for charging tenants for repairs or appliances they were never given. Dawnay did not return calls seeking comment.

Chinatown

Chinatown recently saw the price of buildings with five or more units skyrocket higher than any other neighborhood in the city, boosting the cost of these properties by 42 percent from 2005 to 2006, according to an NYU survey released last month. As luxury condos are increasing, affordable rent buildings are being demolished, advocates said.

"We're bleeding existing affordable housing everyday," said Thomas Yu with Asian Americans for Equality, which began an affordable housing program to combat the problem.

The group buys up apartment buildings, refurbishes units and rents them to lower-income residents for \$1,000 a month or less. So far, the program has preserved 90 affordable units with grants funding and financing through long-term mortgages. Yu's group hopes to purchase another 70 apartments. Asian Americans for Equality is fundraising to defray repair costs, which can reach up to \$50,000 a unit. The group hopes that their efforts also will work to combat severe overcrowding that can be prevalent in the immigrant community.

Bushwick

Residents in the neighborhood, like Gladys Puglla, say they often have to fight landlords to repair anything.

The native-Ecuadorian, who has lived in her apartment for 10 years, has gone without electricity in half of her apartment for more than three months until the city forced her landlord to fix it. She's now fighting her landlord for charging more than allowed for her rent-controlled apartment. Meanwhile, she fears another rent increase.

"Can you imagine? I'm going to move my son and my daughter together, and I'm going to rent my room," she said.

Puglla said that like many immigrant residents in Bushwick, she did not know her rights until she began attending meetings held by Make the Road New York, a group that lobbies for better rent laws and helps tenants wade through the process of fighting a landlord. The group also holds meetings in Spanish.

"These people are fed up and ... realize they have to stand up because otherwise we're going to lose Bushwick," said Irene Tung, director of organizing for the group.