

MARCH 4, 2024

SENATE TESTIMONY FOR OSSOFF HEARING ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING

I. INTRO

Hello, my name is Ayanna Jones and I have been an attorney for nearly two decades. Throughout my career, I have made it my mission to serve low income tenants and underserved populations in the state of Georgia. In my first seven years of practice, I worked with the Georgia Legal Services Program to support communities in beyond the metro Atlanta area. For the last seven years, I represented low-income tenants' within the city of Atlanta through the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation. During the entirety of my career I have connected with advocates across the country and have witnessed similar challenges in the affordable housing sphere. Thank you for allowing me to reflect upon my advocacy journey and share the complexities and challenges of the affordable housing landscape that I have experienced first hand as an advocate for tenants.

II. PBRA HARM

a. POOR CONDITIONS

Today I come to you before you not only as an advocate for affordable housing but as a voice for those who are too often overlooked and neglected – the low income tenants living in substandard conditions within apartments subsidized by HUD. On a daily basis this marginalized group faces poor housing conditions, and mismanagement while project owners continue to benefit from large financial subsidies intended to be used to prevent these problems.

Here are just a few examples of what my clients have had to endure for months and sometimes years on end.

- 1) A mother came to us because her pre school aged child fell out of a second floor window on two separate occasions as a result of rotted window casing. Improper repairs left gaps that led to water intrusion and disintegration of the wood. Once the issue was brought to property management they simply boarded it up rather than make repairs.
- 2) An Elderly grandmother in housing with her daughter and granddaughter had an entryway closet full of black mold. The grandmother was undergoing chemotherapy and had to walk with a cane. The floor structure of the apartment was so rotted away in some areas that the floor was dangerously uneven and soft in many places, making it difficult for the grandmother to even get around safely in her own home.
- 3) A woman called me from the top floor of her townhome desperate because there were rats in her kitchen downstairs and she was afraid to go down to get any of her food. She had already stored her

what food she had in large plastic bins but the rats had previously chewed through them and she didn't know what else she could do.

- 4) Due to mold and rot and moisture my clients have shown me dangerous growth of mushrooms and fungus coming out of their walls, ceiling, floors and even their furniture. These growths pose serious safety risks to their young children. They have to throw out furniture or resort to donations furniture.
- 5) One of our clients was actually trapped in her home because the sewers overflowed and there was raw sewage water surrounding her home. Management promised to come and pump the water and my client ended up waiting for the waters to recede so she could at least leave out of her back door.

These are not just mere inconveniences, these are flagrant violations of human dignity and the right to live in safe and decent conditions. These violations are in direct conflict with HUD's purposes and mandates.

By not acting quickly and with the full force of law behind it, HUD has allowed these property owners to place profit over the health and safety of children and their families, the populations that overwhelmingly rely on affordable housing. Although HUD has an inspection and reinspection process, tenants are not included enough in the process. Once a property is flagged for poor conditions, HUD relies on the certifications of the property manager that these health and safety violations are remedied, but the tenants are not contacted to verify that the issues have actually been fixed. Even when the property continues to fall short of its obligations, HUD is slow to issue abatements and defaults in order to force the property managers to comply with basic health and safety requirements.

My clients often come to me when they are at the end of their rope. On more than one occasion, they reached out to property managers in person, via text, email and rental portals to request repairs. Often their only point of contact is with the front office staff because they were never provided the numbers for supervisors or even HUD local offices that could oversee the management. And even when the compliance line is contacted there is no guarantee that anything will be done to remedy the situation.

I assisted several tenants at a complex where the managers failed to make sure that the trash in the dumpsters was being picked up. The property had several vacant units and tenants were forced to put their overflowing trash into these units. Despite urgent calls to management and the HUD compliance line from tenants and advocates the trash continued to pile up. Rats ran rampant through the piles and the smell was horrible. Eventually a local philanthropic organization offered to donate funds to pay an independent contractor (1-800 GOT JUNK) to haul the debris from some of the more deteriorated buildings and I was able to schedule the work. But this is not something that an outsider should have to do. This was indisputably a failing of management to which they were never held accountable.

In these and other similar situations, the tenant is left with no opportunity for rebuttal to management's assertions to HUD and tenants face retaliation. Getting evicted is not an option tenants can consider when many of them are living paycheck to paycheck, or just coming out of homelessness with their children. And so they will suffer in silence for as long as they can.

III. IDEALS AND ASPIRATIONS AS LOW-INCOME TENANTS ATTORNEY

We must ensure that HUD has the resources to conduct thorough inspections of subsidized properties, promptly address any violations and enforce penalties for violations and non-compliance.

We must also ensure that HUD has the resources to rehabilitate and maintain affordable housing.

Sometimes we can forget how vulnerable we all are. We are not like turtles, with the ability to carry our homes on our backs. We are not like other species on this planet, we don't have fur or scales or other natural protections against the elements. Humans must have shelter from the elements and other conditions of the world. We cannot survive, let alone thrive without good homes. Without a stable home, we have small chance of having stable and supportive neighborhoods and families. They provide the foundation for everything else that we could ever do or hope to achieve.