

‘Desperation and anger’ over fire-stricken Lansdowne apartments, but also hope for promised improvement



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PUBLISHED: October 12, 2024 at 7:30 a.m.



Ciera Goodin, 38, a tenant in the 2900 block of Lakebrook Circle, described the dangerous and uninhabitable conditions at the Lakeside Homes at Holiday Heights apartment complex in Lansdowne. Faulty electrical and plumbing, plus mice and rodent infestation are some of the ongoing issues that she and her three young children endure. A fire early Sunday morning in nearby apartments injured one child and left several families displaced. (Amy Davis/Staff)

As recently as last month, federal housing officials were poised to cut off funding to a troubled Lansdowne apartment complex, lawyers said, and give residents vouchers to move — away from electrical fixtures that would shock them, “black gunk” burbling up through tub drains and, in at least one case, a ceiling laden with bat guano that collapsed onto a baby’s crib.

But then, according to Maryland Legal Aid, the officials said they decided instead to give managers at the rent-subsidized Lakeside Homes at Holiday Heights more time to make long-needed repairs. That was on Oct. 4.

Forty-eight hours later, a fire broke out in one of the nine buildings in the complex. A 7-year-old boy was taken to a hospital for smoke inhalation, according to a resident, and fire officials said 16 tenants, including nine kids, were displaced by the damage to their apartments.

The blaze was just the latest blow to Lakeside Homes, a tired, 47-year-old complex beset both by problems in its 303 apartments but also by its owner's multiple legal and financial woes.

Millennia Companies, based in Cleveland, has been barred from any new federal contracts for five years for "improper conduct" involving at least \$4.9 million in security deposits at some of the more than 250 apartment complexes that it owns.

Additionally, foreclosure proceedings are underway on Lakeside Homes, with the partnership Millennia created to own and operate it, Holiday Heights, defaulting on a \$27 million loan and the property placed in receivership last month, according to court documents.

Holiday Heights “has permitted significant damage to the property to remain unrepaired,” according to a filing seeking the receivership. “These life safety items include, but are not limited to, garbage overflowing from dumpsters, roof leaks, plumbing leaks, mold, disrepair throughout the entire structure, and a collapsed ceiling in at least one of the units. These issues are potentially dangerous to the tenants and present a potential for further harm and waste to the property itself.”

Messages sent to Millennia and the apartments’ office were not returned.

The apartment where the fire started, said resident Demetrice Brown, was her third since she moved into the complex more than eight years ago.

“The first one had rats. The second one, the ceiling collapsed,” the mother of two said wearily. “The third was the fire. Nothing gets done.”

Amanda Wisniewski, an outreach team leader at Legal Aid who has worked on housing issues for about six years, began meeting with residents in August.



Demetrice Brown returns to her apartment to retrieve a few items after a fire ripped through the top-floor apartments in the 2900 block of Lakebrook Circle in Lansdowne early Sunday morning. Several families are displaced. (Amy Davis/Staff)

“I never experienced this level of desperation and anger,” she said. “They are very ready and willing to do what it takes to hold whoever they can accountable.”

Another resident, Ciera Goodin, said she has struggled with a ceiling that seems on the verge of collapse, an “out of control” mouse and roach infestation, a broken refrigerator, walls that are shifting and separating, and all manner of heating and hot water outages. Mold is rampant, she said.

“All our vents are hooked up,” Goodin said. “When you turn on the heat, it smells of mold.”

“We have a lot of issues,” the mother of three said as she sat on the steps outside her apartment. “They need to tear this down.”

This year has brought some hope for change with HUD acting both against the owner and on the condition of the apartments. But that hope is tempered by a past in which the word “troubled” has repeatedly been affixed to the apartments in Baltimore Sun articles for decades, and other renovations have not led to permanent fixes.

The Sun reported, for example, that after Baltimore County passed its Livability Code in 1989, building inspectors descended on what was then called Lake in the Woods and cited its owner for more than 2,000 violations. The apartments have undergone several ownership and name changes, and it was called Circle Terrace when Millennia bought it for \$30.5 million in 2017.

This March, HUD finalized its sanction against Millennia and its owner, Frank T. Sinito, over “unauthorized transfers and underfunded security deposit accounts.”

“Nearly \$4.9 million is missing or was improperly taken from 19 HUD-insured or HUD-subsidized properties,” a department enforcement director wrote. Additionally, a footnote said, there may be improprieties beyond the 19 properties HUD reviewed, which did not include Lakeside Homes.

“HUD has reason to suspect that the problems identified in this notice exist in other properties,” the footnote said. “HUD is in the process of attempting to identify all HUD-insured and/or subsidized properties with missing funds.”

Whether Lakeside Homes will turn out to be one of those properties is not known.

“To say that this is a mess would be to put it mildly,” said Greg Countess, a lawyer and Maryland Legal Aid’s advocacy director for housing & community development. “It is really an injustice.”

HUD, which financed the construction of the apartments in 1977 and subsidizes the rent of its residents, gave Lakeside Homes a bottom-scraping score of 15 out of 100 after an inspection this spring.

An agency spokesperson said that after changes in the ownership structure — with the property in receivership, a new management company was brought in — HUD was giving Lakeside Homes until Oct. 28 to make repairs.

“Should the property conditions not be in compliance with our standards and requirements by this date,” the spokesperson said in an emailed statement, “HUD will evaluate additional remedies.”

Terry Hickey, director of Baltimore County’s Department of Housing and Community Development, said that the prospect of HUD terminating its rent subsidies provided “a leverage point” to get long-needed changes underway. The county has been meeting with HUD and the ownership’s representatives for the past few weeks, he said, and expects to hear the details of a long-term plan to renovate the complex in the next week.



An early morning fire Oct. 6 at 2905 Lakebrook Circle injured a child and displaced residents. (Amy Davis/Staff)

“The fire has accelerated the conversation,” Hickey said.

In the last week at Lakeside, in addition to the boarding up of the section that burned, one building appeared newly painted, and crews have cut down or pruned multiple trees. Meaghan McDermott, an attorney with Legal Aid, said she was concerned that the initial “triage” phase of the repairs seemed largely cosmetic.

“When we were there the day after the fire, there were maintenance folks on the property doing painting and things like that,” she said. “While those things should happen, the electrical issues and the sewage issues and the infestation issues should be addressed first.”

Hickey acknowledged that crews are “tackling low-hanging fruit” initially, but that they’re also emptying overfilled dumpsters and undertaking other tasks that go beyond mere cosmetics.

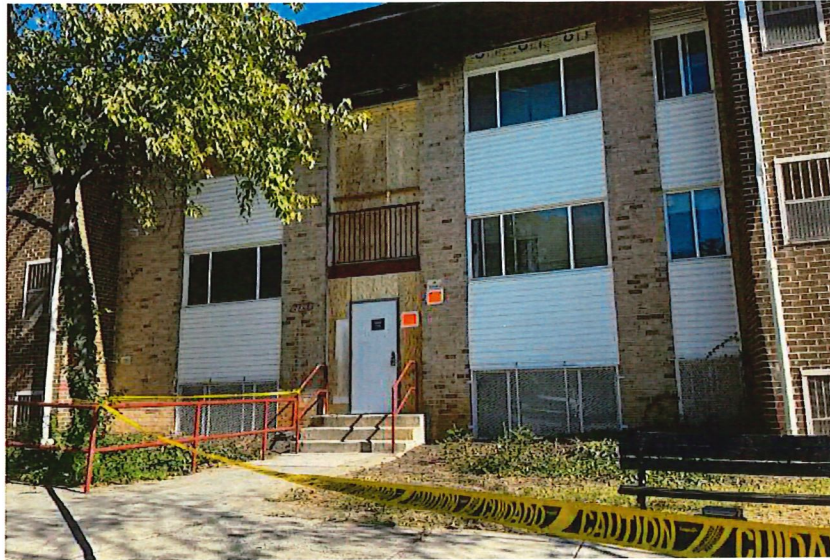
Countess said Legal Aid has been unsuccessful in getting more details on the repair plans and is preparing to file a Freedom of Information Act request for them.

Even if he was taken aback by HUD deciding for now not to terminate its funding of the complex and give residents vouchers to relocate, he and others say even that would not be a perfect solution. Like other jurisdictions, the county does not have enough affordable housing to accommodate a sudden influx of Lakeside residents.

Baltimore County has to create 1,000 affordable units by 2027 as part of a settlement with HUD resolving a series of housing complaints. Among them was that the county demolished 4,100 subsidized housing units without replacing them.

With about 250 of Lakeside's 303 units occupied, Countess said, "that's a massive amount of people to put in the market at the same time."

Hickey said the hope is that with an investment of what likely will be millions of dollars, the complex can be preserved and its apartments brought up to livable conditions.



After a fire at 2905 Lakebrook Circle this month, a Lakeside Homes at Holiday Heights apartment building is now boarded up. (Amy Davis/Staff)

Even as residents cite numerous and often dangerous problems, they're not necessarily looking to move from a place where they have deep ties.

"To say it's a tight-knit is like the understatement of the year," Wisniewski said.

And indeed, as Goodin waited for her children to get off school on a recent afternoon, she worried about her neighbors who had to leave their fire-damaged apartments in a hurry. One had to leave her grandmother's ashes in a closet and only had time to grab her father's flag from the service, she said.

She had heard there might be vouchers that would allow her to move, but for now what she'd really like is to move to a three-bedroom apartment in the complex.

"I grew up here," Goodin said. "My mother lived here. It's home."