A Flurry of Activity at the Serrano Apartments After Residents Decry Conditions

Jo DeVoe  May 20, 2021 at 3:45pm
After residents spoke out about poor living conditions at the Serrano Apartments, county officials and building owner AHC Inc. say they are committed to making changes.

“It is the highest priority I have right now, in part because we are in a different place with vaccines,” Board Chair Matt de Ferranti tells ARLnow. “This is a health and safety issue I will take responsibility for.”

AHC said it is working with county officials, Arlington’s Housing Commission and community organizations to ensure residents’ concerns are heard and addressed.

“Over the past few days, Serrano’s new management company Drucker & Falk has completed more than half of its 100% inspection of the property (except for the apartments where residents have not provided access) to document and remediate all identified issues through systemic improvements given Serrano’s age,” AHC spokeswoman Celia Slater said. “We are now moving forward with the repairs and encourage
everyone to visit our website for updates about the steps we are taking to ensure that all Serrano residents have safe and healthy homes.”

Earlier this month, residents and community leaders told ARLnow about the dire state of some committed affordable apartment units at The Serrano (5535 Columbia Pike). Problems include rodents eating through food and leaving droppings, mold growing on walls and white dust permeating HVAC conductors.

Residents and advocates say they are glad the plight of those living in The Serrano is getting attention but are also frustrated at how many people and walkthroughs it took to get the county and AHC, an affordable housing nonprofit, to act.

The most recent walkthrough was last Friday, when about 40 people, including county officials, Del. Alfonso Lopez, as well as AHC and management representatives, looked at units and talked to residents.

“There were a lot of people there who were supposed to be there a long time ago,” community organizer Janeth Valenzuela said. “Finally, they could experience this with their own eyes and listen to families.”

Former School Board member Tannia Talento said she was frustrated to disrupt the lives of families once more, while not knowing if changes would actually happen.

Ashley Goff, a pastor with Arlington Presbyterian Church, was critical of AHC’s lack of responsiveness to an issue that was many months in the making.

“Look at all the people that had to turn out to get AHC to pay attention,” she said. “They were
shamed into taking action, absolutely.”

(An Arlington NAACP newsletter from November, providing an update on its advocacy about conditions at the Serrano, said that the “exhausting battle by the tenants and their allies” — the NAACP and Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement (VOICE) — had been ongoing since at least the fall of 2019.)

**Conditions provoke strong reactions**

The Serrano has 196 committed affordable units and 84 market-rate units. After walking through about a dozen apartments, officials said the conditions were unacceptable and needed to be fixed, quickly.

“I long ago lived in a place that had a problem with rats and no one can actually relax in their home when they’re worried that there could be mice there,” de Ferranti said.

Some problems will be more difficult, but no less essential, to solve due to the building’s age, he said.

“The medium-term solution for holding AHC accountable is getting a clear and specific schedule of what must be done at the Serrano,” he said. “I could envision taking the form of a short, specific Memorandum of Understanding. That is a step over the coming month or two that we are likely to take.”

Lopez said the county must allocate staff and resources to overseeing committed affordable units to ensure this doesn’t happen again.

“Let me be very clear,” he said. “If these conditions remain unaddressed, I’m more than prepared to take legislative action to protect the residents of the 49th District.”
Prior to the walkthrough, his opponent in the upcoming Democratic primary, Karishma Mehta, also put pressure on the county.

“The Arlington County Board has the power, and more importantly, the burden of responsibility to protect all of Arlington’s residents from deplorable housing conditions,” Mehta said. “Most of The Serrano’s residents are Black and Brown, so this is also a critical racial equity issue that the Board must address.”

Kellen MacBeth, chair of the NAACP’s housing committee, said that even after two years of problems AHC is asking for patience while Drucker & Falk, which took over in February, addresses these conditions.

“Asking for patience to people who have been living this condition for two years is not the correct approach,” he said.

The ousted property manager of the Serrano Apartments, the NAACP’s November newsletter noted, was AHC’s own management subsidiary.

**County, AHC kick into gear**

The county has given tenants the option to move into hotels and provided them with information on seeking legal services and reporting safety code violations, said Housing Commission Chair Eric Berkey. Meanwhile, Arlington Public Health Division is conducting rodent inspections and discussing treatment strategies with AHC.

The two entities are helping families transition into hotels, paid for by the county, while they find other housing or wait for their apartments to be remediated. So far, 14 households have requested to make this move, according to the county.
Resident and organizer Elder Julio Basurto — a member of the Arlington Schools Hispanic Parents Association — along with Valenzuela — said he has been relocated to a hotel. He knows families that have gotten some additional resources but are struggling to downsize from a three-bedroom apartment into a hotel room.

“The county has hired a new person to locate apartments for us but as of yet we’ve not heard anything back,” he said. “There is still some follow-up that needs to occur. There’s still a lot of work to be done.”

Bob Gerhard, who has lived at the Serrano since 2016, said he was also relocated.

“They can wax the floors, paint the walls, they can hide it, but eventually the leaks start, the mice come and the power goes out,” he said.

During a tenants meeting Tuesday, an AHC representative said the company aims to have 100% of households who want to move settled in their new homes by Aug. 1.

In the same meeting, a Drucker & Falk representative asked for cooperation from residents so that all units could be assessed and repaired.

Some residents said they did not give permission because they were not given sufficient advance notice, their kids were home, or they noticed workers not wearing masks.

All of these steps to remediate the issues at the apartment complex are important, but Berkey said he still has questions.

“First, how was it that AHC was unable to fix the many issues raised by residents?” he said. “And
two, why, despite over a year of work by [county] staff with AHC, did it turn out to be that conditions involving air quality and rodent infestation continued to persist?”

Photo via Google Maps

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