Bachman-area tenants see improvements after pushing Dallas code compliance for help

Placement of bilingual and Hispanic inspectors in the area has built trust between tenants and the city.

Guadalupe Arista points to the window AC unit that sits in the kitchen window of her apartment, where she pays for central AC that does not function properly in the unit in Dallas on Thursday, June 29, 2023. Apartment tenants in the Bachman Lake area have been working with the city of Dallas and Code Compliance to have better living conditions in their units.(Liesbeth Powers / Staff Photographer)

By María Ramos Pacheco

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Families who live in apartments in the Bachman Lake area of northwest Dallas say they’ve seen improvements in what have been described as deplorable conditions there but add that there is a lot more work to be done.

Tenants organized almost a year ago with the help of Bachman Lake Together, Dallas Area Interfaith, Lumin Education and the Dallas Department of Code Compliance to get complex owners and managers to address dilapidated buildings, pest infestations, air-conditioning problems and more.
Guadalupe Arista, 33, and her family used to wait for months to get issues in her apartment addressed, such as the leaky ceiling from her bathroom. But when Arista started to get involved with housing advocates and spoke up about the problems she faced, she said things began to improve.

“After the meetings with the city, the manager solved some of my requests faster than they used to,” said Arista, mother of two. “They knew I was involved with the city and the housing organizations, and I think that’s why they fixed some things.”

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Arista lives in one of five apartment complexes targeted by the housing advocates. Tenants in the area have said they feel forgotten and ignored by the city. Several barriers contributed to the disconnect, such as the fact that many residents speak only Spanish and couldn’t communicate with city officials.

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Some did not know how to report poor living conditions to the city through 311 calls. Others feared doing so, said Ariel Garcia, code compliance administrator.

The movement started when tenants and the housing groups secured a public meeting in March with officials from the Department of Code Compliance and other city departments.

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“It was all our initiative. We had to reach out and push for these meetings because families said ‘enough,’” said Ericka Ventura of Dallas Area Interfaith.

After the meeting, the city held information meetings in Spanish to educate tenants about their rights, explaining how to report issues through the 311 line, city website and a mobile app. City officials also took reports in person.

Dallas’ Department of Code Compliance has been working with the three groups and tenants, holding community meetings to listen to their concerns. Ventura said that over time, more families began to attend community meetings, speak up about their problems and spread the word.

This summer, the department is hosting a 12-week pop-up program across the city to provide information and resources and teach residents how to submit complaints through the 311 line, app and website.

Bilingual inspectors
In the Bachman Lake area, 43 apartment complex properties are registered with the city. There are about 500 apartment buildings and more than 7,000 units for rent. About 2 out of every 3 residents are Hispanic.

The city now provides area residents with more information in Spanish.

Another key improvement was for the city to place Hispanic bilingual inspectors in the area. Language barriers added to a general lack of relationships with code inspectors, organizers say.

“Since the inspectors are also Hispanics, they can identify with the families and understand the struggles. These inspectors showed empathy for the families and built trust among the families,” said Ventura.

For Arista and her family, getting to know a code inspector in a personal way means she knows whom to call directly and knows the history of issues in her apartment.

Related: Some Dallas 311 reporting options leaves Spanish-speaking residents in the dark

Rosana Savcic, manager of the multitenant and single-family rental division in code compliance, said that since inspectors Amy Del Toro and Victor Gonzalez started to work with the community, the number of calls and complaints from that area has increased.

Tenants say they like working with them.

“Don Victor has been accommodating, always very kind, and always showing up when I have problems in the unit, either the A/C or holes in the wall,” said Arista. “I feel comfortable telling him the issues we have and knowing that he would go and speak with the manager to fix them.”

Ventura said families who have been in contact with Del Toro are more confident when reporting problems.

“Del Toro took a lot of her time by listening to the families and explaining to them … what can be solved in 24 hours,” said Ventura. “The residents felt like someone from the city finally understood their situation when these two inspectors kept showing up for them.”

Code inspectors did not respond to The Dallas Morning News’ request for comment.

Working more closely with the residents has been important, Savcic said, because it is easier for city inspectors to investigate formal complaints.
More work to be done

Not everyone has seen things improve as fast as they would like.

Claudia Cruz, 38, another area resident, said she is discouraged about how long it takes for things to get fixed and is afraid of retaliation if she reports something. Residents have told housing advocates about some landlords’ intimidation tactics, specifically targeting those without immigration status.

“We see how office managers treat other people and tell them not to report problems or ask them for U.S. IDs. We have seen changes and things are getting better, but not for everyone,” said Cruz.

“I understand that we are not from this country, but we are humans and deserve a safe place to live for us and our children,” she said. “We are going to continue this fight.”

Related: Bachman Lake tenants deserve stronger support from the city

Even among some families that have seen improvements in conditions, such as Arista’s, there is skepticism about how other issues will be solved. For example, last week, Arista had trouble with her air conditioning, and even when she called the inspector, the management office took a day to fix it.

“Don Victor told me he couldn’t do anything about it because the law says they have 24 hours to fix it, so we had to wait and bear for one day with the extreme heat,” said Arista.

Chapter 27 of the Dallas City Code establishes minimum property standards to ensure that all “residential buildings, structures, and premises are safe, sanitary, and fit for tenants.” Property owners have 24 hours to fix life-hazard conditions, which include cooling and heating problems, before receiving a citation.
Water runs down the edge of the tub as Guadalupe Arista points out areas of her apartment that need repairs in Dallas on Thursday, June 29, 2023. Apartment tenants in the Bachman Lake area have been working with the city of Dallas and code compliance to have better living conditions in their units. (Liesbeth Powers / Staff Photographer)

“We have seen that the inspectors are trying their best to help tenants, but we know that the city laws can complicate it. There are also a lot of apartments but not enough inspectors,” said Ventura.

In March, when the local organizations met with the Department of Code Compliance and other city officials, one of the points discussed was how to make changes in Chapter 27 to improve the minimum property standards, focusing on increasing inspections and shortening periods landlords have to fix issues.

There has been no progress in changing anything in Chapter 27.

“At the end of the day, every family wants a safe and healthy place to raise their children. That’s all they are asking for,” said Ventura.
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