

Yolo County Housing Authority

SUMMARY

The Grand Jury investigated the Yolo County Housing Authority in response to a citizen's complaint. The agency did not address a very serious complaint on the part of an elderly resident regarding tenant safety. Also, there were shortcomings in the emergency pull cord system, which cannot be relied on to ensure safety for the elderly and disabled. The Grand Jury found the Yolo County Housing Authority violated its mandate to ensure tenant safety.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

California Penal Code Section 925 authorizes the Grand Jury to investigate all branches of county government to be assured they are being administered efficiently, honestly, and in the best interests of its citizens. An investigation of the Yolo County Housing Authority (YCHA) was conducted in response to a citizen's complaint regarding resident safety at its West Sacramento senior housing site, Riverbend Senior Manor (RSM), on Cummings and Lighthouse Drive. The complaint focused on the failure of management to deal with a disruptive tenant who repeatedly brandished a gun, peeped through windows, exposed himself, used threatening and abusive language, and screamed and howled throughout the night. There was also concern about the well-being of a minor who lived with the disruptive adult and reportedly was his caregiver.

ACTIONS TAKEN

The Grand Jury interviewed four YCHA staff and two RSM residents. In addition, the Grand Jury reviewed YCHA policies, job descriptions, written procedures available to tenants relevant to tenant safety and grievances, and results of recent YCHA unit emergency pull cord inspections performed by an outside firm (November 2009 and February 2010). During their visits, the Grand Jury performed visual inspections of the site exterior, walkways, common areas, and investigated safety conditions of living units at RSM. Time did not permit a review of YCHA emergency preparedness plans for senior and disabled residents.

WHAT THE JURY DETERMINED

The Yolo County Board of Supervisors created a Risk Control Policy Statement for YCHA in 2008, stating "the safety and well being of the residents and employees of the Housing Authority of the County of

Yolo is of the utmost importance." (Resolution 09-06). One of YCHA's purposes is to provide safe and affordable housing for low income, senior and other disadvantaged residents.

RSM is comprised of two independent living facilities for senior and disabled citizens who receive federal housing assistance, 66 units in all. It is adjacent to and shares management with Las Casitas that provides 73 units for federally-assisted families. The county manages the units and is subject to federal, state, and county administrative rules and guidelines.

The on-site property manager oversees tenant selection and orientation, rent calculations, budget administration, and the work of the two facilities' support staff. The program supervisor works among YCHA sites to direct daily operation, monitor work of subordinates, coordinate resident activities, and oversee inspections. The office is staffed four days a week, 8 AM to 5 PM. YCHA staff do not respond to medical emergencies or tenant alarms; residents must contact 9-1-1 or identify other assistance in such cases. YCHA maintains an 800 number for after-hours emergency repairs.

YCHA has a written grievance procedure for "disputes which a tenant may have with respect to a Housing Authority action or failure to act in accordance with the individual tenant's lease or PHA regulations which adversely affect the individual." The YCHA Residential Lease Agreement permits lease termination if a tenant creates a safety hazard: "YCHA shall give written notice of the proposed termination of the lease (in a reasonable amount of time, not to exceed 30 days, when the health or safety of other tenants or the employees ... (is involved)." However, staff indicated the typical use of the grievance procedure is during the course of proposed termination of tenant lease and not to resolve for tenant-to-tenant complaints.

YCHA has an "Incident Documentation Form" through which tenants make written complaints about any issue they wish. There are no written policies on YCHA's responsibilities once it receives a completed "Incident" form. Staff stated their procedure is to review and respond to the report according to their opinion of the severity of the issue. Incident reports on tenant safety may be forwarded to YCHA senior management by supervisory staff if they consider the matter severe.

In this instance, the complainant submitted multiple incident reports, over the course of four or more months, regarding the disruptive tenant. The complainant did not use the official YCHA form, but reports contained the essential information. No action was taken by the YCHA. Staff acknowledged complaints were simply

read and filed. Eventually, the troubled tenant moved due to a medical crisis.

With regard to other safety conditions in the living units at RSM, building exteriors are equipped with Knox boxes that hold unit keys for emergency personnel. Nineteen impediments to foot and wheelchair travel were noted during YCHA's November 2009 inspection. These and three other impediments noted by the Grand Jury have been corrected.

Living units for seniors and the disabled are equipped with emergency pull cords in bedrooms and bathrooms. The cords are to be pulled in case residents need emergency assistance and cannot use a telephone. Pulling the cord is supposed to activate an exterior light and a siren to alert others for the need of emergency assistance. The Grand Jury could not confirm that this system is operational.

The Grand Jury received conflicting information from staff regarding how the critically-important pull cords worked, e.g., what alarms might be activated and whether alarms might automatically notify first responders. Despite a lack of clarity as to how the pull cord systems operate, staff seems to assume that the system works. As noted above, staff do not respond to pull cord alarms.

Inspectors are hired by YCHA to periodically inspect the units, and the most recent inspection included the pull cords. Maintenance workers accompany inspectors either to make repairs on-the-spot or prepare work orders. The February inspection revealed that cords in about one-third of the units were not accessible, either blocked by furniture or tied up too high to be reached by a person on the floor.

The review of the job descriptions revealed that neither of those for the two supervisory positions that have the most day-to-day-contact with and oversight of the tenants (Real Estate Housing Services Supervisor and Housing Specialist II or Project Manager) contained any specific statement regarding their roles in tenant safety.

FINDINGS

- F-1** Despite multiple complaints, the YCHA did not take action to deal with the disturbed tenant and thereby jeopardized the safety of other tenants.
- F-2** The failure to deal with the disturbed tenant posed a potential risk for a minor.
- F-3** The emergency pull cord system may or may not be effective, depending on whether cords are appropriately deployed inside the units, whether

the system is operating correctly, and whether alarms are detected and responded to by others.

- F-4** The job descriptions of staff who have direct oversight of housing projects do not adequately address tenant safety.
- F-5** Supervisory staff have not ensured compliance with established policies and procedures regarding responsiveness to tenant complaints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10-17** Enforce eviction procedures to remove tenants who pose significant physical safety hazards to themselves or other tenants, in accordance with federal, state, and local laws.
- 10-18** Enhance the emergency pull cord system to ensure that emergency alarms actively notify an on-duty responder. Coordinate planning with tenant council to ensure the new system is sufficient, but not intrusive to tenant privacy. When on-site, staff should respond to pull cord alarms.
- 10-19** Include tenant safety in job descriptions, including those for senior management, and incorporate disciplinary measures for staff who fail to identify or act on tenant safety problems.
- 10-20** Promote monitoring and awareness regarding tenant safety issues. Reporting should be coordinated with tenant councils to promote accuracy and completeness.
- 10-21** Institute annual training sessions on safety and emergency preparedness for the entire staff and tenants.

COMMENTS

The Grand Jury is particularly concerned about the state of the senior and disabled residents' alarms at RSM because it is in an area well-known for gang activities. For this reason, the Grand Jury urges YCHA to enhance surveillance and safety measures at this site.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

Pursuant to California Penal Code Sections 933(c) and 933.05, the Yolo County Grand Jury requests a response as follows:

From the following governing body:

- YCHA Board of Commissioners (Findings F-1 through F-5; Recommendations 10-17 through 10-21)