

Testimony of Sandra Clayton
“A Matter of Life and Death: Improving Fire Safety in Federally Assisted Housing”
Field Hearing
Subcommittee on Housing, Community Development, and Insurance
House Financial Services Committee
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Bronx, New York

Chair Cleaver, Ranking Member Hill, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about my experiences at the Twin Parks North West apartment building.

On January 9, a fire in my building took the lives of 17 residents. The fire started when a portable heater fell on a mattress and ignited, and it spread because the doors were propped open. But tenants had been living in dangerous conditions for years, and the property owners swept it under the rug. Their neglect led to this fire.

I was a tenant in the building for 26 years. Over that time, I saw my building deteriorate. For years, the heat wasn't working properly. I kept four space heaters in my apartment to stay warm. Everyone I know had space heaters. I used to put plastic covers over the A/C vents to prevent the cold air from coming through. Before this tragic event, my building was not perfect, but some issues should have been addressed, like proper working heat.

Before the fire, the front doors of the building were not operating properly, and the building's alarm system was malfunctioning as it would go off at night. When the fire alarm went off in January, I assumed it was nothing because I was so used to the alarm going off. The only reason why I knew there was an issue and was able to get out safely is because my neighbor yelled down the hallway, "Fire! Fire!" If not for my neighbor, who knows what would have happened.

After the fire, the Red Cross, Bronx Works, and other organizations were very generous. They gave me furniture, bedsheets, and pots and pans. I am so grateful.

My whole life changed after the fire. I have been receiving counseling services, and I have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I watched people who were being resuscitated and were not responding. My ex-girlfriend had tubes down her throat for weeks. I'm getting physical therapy now because I hurt my leg. I'm thankful that I made it out alive, but I'm sad for those who didn't.

During the fire, I lost my dog. I was trying to save myself, my ex-girlfriend, and my dog, but I couldn't. I am so hurt inside, even if I walk around with a smile on.

I'm at a new apartment now. I feel safer now. My apartment has a sprinkler system, and I can control my own heat and air conditioning. The laundry is on the same floor. The cameras are working.

But, I'm worried. I sleep with my doors unlocked. I put my clothes for the next day by my bed, just in case I need to run out of the apartment if there's another fire. I'm hoping that I'll get over this over time, but I'm constantly worried.

I had to return to the building a few weeks ago, and my whole body reacted. I remembered how the smoke was coming through the walls, so thick and fast. I will always remember that smell. They're trying to cover up the smell, but I'll never forget it.

There were many other health and safety issues at my apartment building that were never fully addressed. There was feces, urine, and garbage sometimes in the stairwells and hallways. There were rodents in some apartments. Even though they brought in an exterminator, it wasn't fixed. So, I had to pay for my own exterminator. The security guards didn't keep us safe. There were no cameras in places where it was needed – like in the stairwells. Management thought that just because we're low income, they can treat us poorly. We had become accustomed to living in bad conditions like that.

There's been so much attention to the building after the fire. Everyone says they want to fix things. But, they should have been doing this all along.

I want Congress to take action to keep our buildings safe. It should not take a tragedy before people get serious about improving the conditions in these buildings. If this happened to us, it can happen to other people too. Congress needs to step up.

Even more importantly, we need to be respected because we matter. Our lives matter. My life matters. I'm just one person, but I want to help change things, so that other people do not go through this.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.