

Tenants eye union, are 'tired of settling'

BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER



Jessica Phelps / Staff photographer

Willie Rector joins other tenants of the Seven Oaks apartment complex at a rally to demand better living conditions.



Ashton Condel of the Texas Organizing Project rallies with Peair Richardson, a tenant at Seven Oaks.

Jessica Phelps/Staff photographer

Zhi'Ria Cook moved into the Seven Oaks Apartments complex near Leon Valley almost a year ago and has faced problems since Day One.

The 23-year-old single mother said the first time she saw her unit it was littered with dead roaches. The problem was just the tip of the iceberg — Cook said she has lodged complaints about a roach- infested refrigerator and major water leaks that have gone unaddressed.

“The management doesn’t care as long they’re getting money in their pocket,” Cook said. “We’re all dollar signs to them.”

Cook, a housekeeper, was one of dozens of tenants and leaders from Texas Organizing Project that teamed up Thursday afternoon to deliver a list of demands to the complex’s leasing office, which included a request that all maintenance problems be fixed within 72 hours. Some residents in attendance said they have received notices to vacate with little time to leave, so the list of demands also states that no tenant should be forced to move out before Dec. 23. Tenants are also calling for relocation assistance of \$6,000 per unit.

The letter to management also states that tenants are facing “unfair eviction notices,” arbitrary fees, broken air conditioning units, black mold, rats and roaches.

Though the group of organizers and frustrated tenants wanted to speak to management, the office was closed upon their arrival close to 5 p.m. A sign on the door stated that the office would be closed Thursday starting at 1 p.m. and would be reopened Friday morning at 9, though the office hours on the building state that the offices are normally open until 6 p.m. on weekdays.

But the crowd gathered in front of the building shouting some of their demands and concerns, and chanting “no justice, no peace,” while some in the group waved at the video camera that faces the front door. The group held up photographs of problems in some of the apartments.

“Management, here are the demands of your tenants,” Texas Organizing Project’s Lloyd Kuykendoll said into a blowhorn, calling on management to come to the door. “These are your tenants and they refuse to live in substandard conditions.”

Peair Richardson, 29, taped the tenant demands to the door of the building. A few crowd members cheered when Richardson said that the group would leave reminders until they get a response.

Richardson, a server at a Chinese restaurant, has lived in the complex for about nine months. He hasn't had hot water in months despite putting in a work order and talking to an employee at the leasing office. After feeling like his concerns were dismissed Richardson told the office that he would not pay them until his water was fixed. Since then, he has received two notices to vacate that had three-day deadlines to move out.

Other tenants, including Willie Rector, 52, and David Riojas, 53, have faced problems with their bills. The two receive rental assistance from the city but said they have received eviction notices from the complex that claim they have not paid their full bill. The two said that management told them they were switched to more expensive month-to-month leases, but Rector and Riojas said they were not informed of the shift ahead of time and the extra cost that came with it.

But the billing is one of many problems Rector said she wants fixed. She said problems with plumbing, air conditioning and a shut-down laundry facility are also on her radar.

"I'm tired of settling," Rector said. She has lived in the complex for two years.

Tenants said that many of the problems started sprouting up under new management that took over either at the end of last year or early this year.

Richardson said he has seen many tenants move after getting notices to vacate, leaving many units in the complex empty.

Cook's fears of the complex go beyond what she sees inside her unit — she said safety is a major problem. She knows people whose belongings were stolen from in front of their doors and has personally been confronted by people while she is walking around the complex. Cook said she has relatives caring for her 3-year-old because she is scared to bring him to the apartment.

Attendees were unsurprised by the office's closure, noting that on Wednesday the leasing office staff called the police when a group of tenants and TOP officials

tried to meet at the apartment complex to discuss a game plan for how to make their concerns known.

Police were called out on Thursday as well — two officers drove up at 5:40 p.m. as the gathering was winding down, saying that the complex called police at 5:30 p.m. indicating that they were unable to get back into the office due to a crowd gathered in front of the door.

But the calls didn't deter TOP or tenants; the group plans to meet up on Saturday, potentially at the complex, to start organizing a tenants union. Housing Justice Organizer Ashton Condel, 28, said TOP will bring attorneys to help in that effort.

“It's going to give these people legal protection,” Condel said of forming the union.

The leasing office did not return a 2 p.m. request for comment from the Express-News. Achieve Investment Group, which Texas Organizing Project's Marco Acuña said owns the complex, also did not immediately respond to an email request for comment on Thursday.

Seven Oaks Apartment complex shows up as “permanently closed” on Google Maps. The same address and phone number posted on the complex's leasing office show up on the Achieve Investment Group's property website, but under a different complex name — Colinas At Medical. megan.rodriguez@express-news.net