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VISITACION VALLEY - DISTRICT

Sunnydale Tenants Seek Self-Management

By Susan Herbert and Pat Christensen

A group of residents from the largest public housing project in the city have legally incorporated as a non-profit agency in an extraordinary effort to secure a resident management training program, as promised by federal law.

The legal maneuver circumvented what many claim is strong resistance on the part of the San Francisco Housing Authority to implementing federal guidelines that guarantee tenants' rights to organize, incorporate and apply for funding.

The executive director of the Housing Authority, which administers the city's 47 public housing sites, has requested bids from private firms to manage several project sites, in opposition to tenants' wishes to be trained for self-management.

"Nothing can stop us..."

Sunnydale, a 746-unit complex near Visitacion Valley in the southeast corner of the city, is home to more than 2,000 residents. The complex is slated for federally-funded comprehensive rehabilitation in the fall.

At a raucous meeting Thursday, Sunnydale residents Abu Bakr and Brenda Stringer waved the state incorporation papers and told the group that they were making San Francisco history.

According to the Office of Housing and Urban Development, public housing tenants can incorporate and apply directly to Washington, D.C. for funds to hire a management training consultant.

"Nothing can stop us now," said a jubilant Bakr, who had just returned from a conference on resident

management training in the nation's capital. Bakr had met with tenants from around the country who are now learning management skills.

"Jack Kemp (HUD secretary) is the main man, and he is behind us," Bakr said.

Currently, the low-slung, barracks-like buildings are rundown, scarred with graffiti, and infected with drug-related violence.

With their legal incorporation, the residents will have a strong say in their complex's renovation plans, as well as in its subsequent management.

Tenants of Alemany, North Beach and Hunters View housing projects have indicated their desire for resident management training.

The program that trains tenants in property management takes a three- to five-year commitment.

There are 100 public housing tenant groups across the country who are either in the process of securing Technical Assistance Grants or in the midst of training now.

"This is one of the Secretary Kemp's priorities," said Carol Nyce, HUD spokesperson in Washington, D.C. "It's a whole movement - giving the residents a stake in their homes and their neighborhoods."

The Sunnydale residents are the third group in the Bay Area to seek self-management. Tenants in Richmond and Marin City have already secured federal funds and have embarked on the program.

An ongoing struggle

The struggle for tenant-management training at

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Sunnydale

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Sunnydale has been going on for several months.

Brenda Stringer, the president of Sunnydale Tenants Association, along with tenants Abu Bakr and Zakiyyah Mahason, has led the move toward resident management.

Stringer circulated a petition in January, seeking the tenants' approval for the plan. More than two-thirds of the 700 families who live in the project signed.

Meanwhile, Shirley Dorton, treasurer of the tenants' association, grew unhappy with the direction the group was taking and asked that Stringer be recalled. Dorton appealed to the executive board of the citywide public housing tenants association to support the disbanding of the entire board of Sunnydale officers.

The parent board — the Public Housing Tenants Association — issued a flyer, supporting the recall, and cited reports of violence at, and disruptions of, Sunnydale meetings. In addition, the association noted that all funds were being withheld by the Housing Authority until the matter was resolved.

"We are also recommending that no one of the current board run for election for two years," said Cleola Richardson, president of the association.

Dorton collected signatures from 200 residents in support of the recall, although several of the tenants later said they had not fully understood the intent of the petition.

"They (Stringer and Bakr) are not representative of the tenants here," said Dorton. "It's my goal to

get a full board that will work together, not fight with each other."

The motion to recall the officers passed, 10-6, when the residents voted Thursday.

Elections for new officers will be held later in the month.

"I have no conflict with the corporation," Dorton said, "but what about tenants who don't want tenant management? I object to the fact that this whole community didn't get to vote on the corporation. The idea of resident management should have been completely explained."

Stringer, however, said she had gathered enough signatures to show hefty support for the program. She said she has evidence that the Housing Authority staff was instrumental in the recall effort against her.

Tenants also questioned the Housing Authority's tactic of withholding funds until new officers are installed.

"There is a lot of intimidation going on," Stringer said, "not only because of my efforts to bring about resident management, but because I have spoken out in the past about the poor maintenance here and the lack of affirmative action hiring."

The Housing Authority could not be reached for comment.

As the Sunnydale Resident Management Council, Stringer and her cohorts will now work to fill vacancies on their board of directors and then launch an intensive effort to educate the residents on all aspects of the training program.

"Only after we get everything in place will we go to HUD for funding," said Stringer.