

## Houston Chronicle: Living Hell 'We need out of here'

Link to article that also has video footage:

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Living-Hell-housing-tenants-hud-properties-problem-16000650.php>

A failure of government oversight produced a housing system across the U.S. that hurts the people who need it the most.

By [Sarah Smith](#) Published March 11, 2021

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Tina Harris wants to move out of Sandpiper Cove with her daughter, Aaliyah. But they can't afford rent anywhere else in Galveston. (Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

## Chapter 1

**'They have failed time and time again'**

### ***Galveston, Texas***

While her mother went to City Council for the second time in seven months to beg for help, Aaliyah Lewis lay in her hospital bed, breathing oxygen from a respirator, alone.

It was December 2019, and Aaliyah was 15. She had been rushed to the hospital twice that year. She hated missing school. The first time, she'd coughed so hard she almost couldn't breathe. Her stomach caved in as she heaved, fighting for air. Her mother, Tina Harris, had called 9-1-1 and cried all the way to the ER on the other end of Galveston Island.

Tina sat by Aaliyah's bed when she wasn't at her job as a home health aide. Aaliyah chattered rapidly to the nurses about facts from her favorite subject, history. She told them how Sacagawea was pregnant when she went on the expedition, how people used to put chalk in bread to make it whiter, and how if you heated Victorian tubs wrong, you could boil yourself as you bathed.

Tina told the nurses about their apartment. They lived in a 192-unit complex called Sandpiper Cove whose private owner was subsidized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Sandpiper Cove had long been [a place to avoid](#) on the island, for its reputation of shootings and drug deals. Trash always seemed to linger outside the complex's light brick walls. A white bird set against an orange backdrop on the office awning served as one of the few homages to the animal from which the building took its name.

Tina and Aaliyah had moved from Tennessee to Texas City and then to Galveston when Aaliyah was 10. When Aaliyah was 13, she heard her first shooting. She ran to grab her mother and they hid in the bathroom, away from the windows. She still jumps at loud noises. After Hurricane Harvey flooded the island in August 2017, rain seeped through Aaliyah's window and ran over the electric socket just under it. The leak never stopped. The substance that appeared in the leak's wake looked like mold. When the air turned musty in Aaliyah's room, Tina put Aaliyah in her own room and slept on the couch.

Most of the nurses sympathized. One nurse, Tina's favorite, told her to keep fighting. Another said, "Well, you could move out."

Tina didn't say what she was thinking. If she did move out, she and Aaliyah would wind up homeless. Their rent was HUD-subsidized. She couldn't afford a market-rate home in Galveston, and Hurricane Ike had devastated the island's public housing supply back in 2008. What, she wanted to ask the nurse, would you do?

To live in public housing is to live without many options. It is both the housing of last resort for millions of Americans and a commodity with a drastic shortage. To live in the type of public housing Tina and Aaliyah call home is to live with even fewer options. Sandpiper Cove is a [project-based rental assistance property](#), run at the federal level. HUD subsidizes the owner for a unit's full market rent to make up the difference of what a tenant can pay. HUD twice declined to make any of its officials available for an interview, provide a general statement or answer a list of 32 written questions.

Subsidies are tied directly to tenancy on the property, giving owners and managers outsize power: If tenants get evicted, they lose the subsidy. There is no real equivalence to the power dynamics in non-subsidized housing, where bad reviews and move-outs can force fixes or management changes. And to live in the project-based rental properties usually means living in properties built decades ago in less-desirable, segregated areas, under laxer building codes than even their concurrently built, government-owned counterparts.

When it was [the tenants' turn](#) to speak at Galveston's City Council, Tina went second. Her hair was tied back in a messy knot. She was exhausted from sleeping folded into a chair next to Aaliyah's bed.

"I have a 15-year-old daughter that's right now, that is in the hospital due to mold issues," she said. "If y'all would like to take a look at my phone ..."

She held it up. "I have not had time to print out nothing 'cause like I said, my daughter is still in the hospital over all this. It's to the point now I don't even want to bring my daughter home," she said.

She told the Galveston City Council what she had wanted to tell the nurse: "I can't — I can't afford to go out here on my own. If I do, I'm gonna end up on the streets with my daughter."

A white-haired city councilman sitting in the middle of the curved table at the front of the room said: "Duly noted."

She went back to Aaliyah's bedside, furious.



Aaliyah Lewis moved into Sandpiper Cove with her mother when she was 10. When she was 13, she heard her first shooting. She hid in the bathroom until it stopped. (Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

The problem with the property was not a new one, and the city officials had been frustrated with the apartments for the past two decades.

Five years before Tina went to speak, the Galveston City Council had been deep in discussion about [what to do](#) with the property. A new owner was coming in — again. This time, it was a company out of Ohio called The Millennia Companies, which built its brand on taking over run-down, HUD-subsidized properties like Sandpiper Cove and rehabbing them. The complex rehabs involve assembling capital, creating a budget, hiring the right personnel, finding contractors and, when the work is underway, relocating tenants.

#### ABOUT OUR REPORTING

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In its yearlong investigation, the Houston Chronicle filed more than 2,000 records requests at the federal, state, county and local levels to get complaints, inspections and internal emails between officials. The Chronicle reviewed court records and interviewed tenants, local officials and housing experts from across the country. The scenes described were either witnessed by the reporter or written based on documentation of the events described and extensive interviews.

The CEO, a middle-aged man with heavy-lidded eyes named Frank Sinito, was a Cleveland scion who regularly appears in the rankings of the city's most powerful people and says in interviews that he still finds time, every night, to have dinner with his family. He had acquired his first, 14-unit affordable property in 1985 after graduating from Cleveland State University and started Millennia 10 years later, quickly building it up. He had found God after his father — an imprisoned mobster — converted in his cell and left Frank his Bible. He combined his own faith and his father's experience to help launch True Freedom Ministries, a nonprofit ministering to people in prison.

“Millennia is committed to preserving affordable housing, despite the challenges that are associated with purchasing deeply distressed and declining apartment developments,” Frank wrote in a letter responding to questions from the Chronicle. “We believe the preservation of this housing stock is critical so that individuals of all income levels have an affordable and quality place to live.”

#### [SEE MILLENNIA'S RESPONSE TO THE CHRONICLE INVESTIGATION](#)

At a Jan. 14, 2016, City Council meeting, Millennia — the property owner for nearly a year up to that point — made its pitch. The company at the time managed more than 18,000 apartment homes, per the PowerPoint, spanning 167 properties across 18 states. (By 2021, the company would list over 250 complexes on its website. It would take in approximately \$137 million in HUD contracts on project-based rental assistance properties, a figure that excludes federal, state and local housing tax breaks the company has won.) Millennia representatives showed photos of rehabs they'd done across the country and what they had started doing at Sandpiper: a repainted office, a spiffed-up exterior for the community building.



Three-year-old Peyton Johnson plays in front of her home at the Sandpiper Cove apartments, which are privately owned but subsidized by HUD.

(Mark Mulligan/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

The company pledged to resurface parking lots, upgrade the units, address sewer and water issues. Council members were skeptical but felt they didn't have much say over what was — or wasn't — about to happen. (“We have no enforcement power here; we just don't,” one council member complained in a December 2014 meeting after learning a new owner was coming. “If I was the prospective purchaser, I would say anything I thought we wanted to hear. ... Then if he fails to perform, it looks like we didn't do our job.”)

In 2019, the city used what it felt was its one bit of leverage. When Millennia asked for a city endorsement of a tax credit application, the city refused.

“They have failed time and time again to do what they said they would do,” the city manager, Brian Maxwell, wrote in an email March 11, 2019. “Tough love, but I am done with these folks.”

When Tina complained, the city officials had already made up their minds. Sandpiper Cove was HUD's problem. They had no enforcement power over HUD properties under their current code regulations. No one thought of rewriting the law — or, as they said later in interviews, was inclined to do so.

One council member who heard the tenants speak at the December meeting tried to set up entry into the units with advocacy groups; nothing ever came of it. They decided they would go see the units at HUD's planned January 2020 visit. A council member emailed the city manager, [asking to set a meeting](#) with HUD. "I'm tired of the city shouldering most of the blame," he emailed colleagues. Another council member, who earlier had tried to set up access through a local advocate, emailed colleagues as they decided to go in with HUD: "Does the city need to make some announcement about this so it appears that we care?"

After the December meeting, sewage bubbled again at Sandpiper. Tina walked across the parking lot to take pictures of the coughed-up toilet paper, making a face at the smell. She stood next to a woman with bright-blue hair. The woman introduced herself. Her name was Emily Hunter. She had moved in with her son in May 2017. By the time she met Tina, Emily was angry.

On Emily's first day at what her son eventually would call "The Bad House," she had walked across the western half of the complex from the parking lot to get to their unit and noticed the trash along the walkway and A/C units leaking. The manager at the time had told her that she would live in one of the nicer units. She looked around and thought, not bad for HUD housing. The ceiling had bowed, the stove had no hood and an old cable wire dangled onto their porch, but it was clean.

The unit got worse. There was a [power outage](#) in the complex. The sewers backed up. She saw cockroaches. When their upstairs neighbors showered, water dripped into their bathroom (her son still calls it "the leaking house"). But none of those issues were what made Emily eventually call the local paper.

Nearly as long as he'd lived at Sandpiper, her son had participated in Ironman Club, an after-school group that gave him activities and father figures to look up to. In September 2019, two months before Aaliyah's second of three hospitalizations and Tina's second trip to City Council, Millennia kicked it out. Ironman had used the complex clubhouse under a verbal agreement. She called the Galveston Daily News. While she waited for the story to come out, she typed "Millennia housing" into her computer search bar. She scrolled past the company page and through headlines alleging problems in states as far away as Florida and Missouri. When her own story came out, she started tweeting.

“Please spread the word of the wrongs being done to the families of these apartments,” she tweeted on Sept. 17, 2019.

“It’s an entire community falling through the cracks. They need our help. Ask me for more info.”

She tweeted again. A lawyer based in Florida replied. His name was Malik Leigh, and he was representing tenants in another HUD-subsidized building in Florida, called Stonybrook, also managed by Millennia. Would she want to get on the phone with him?

She did. They spoke that Thursday morning. He told her about the Palm Beach County Tenants Union, co-chaired by a longtime resident of Stonybrook named Crystal Lewis. Crystal had become one of the lead plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the company and HUD over its conditions. Like Sandpiper Cove, the complex Malik worked with was infamous in its city. It may have been decades old and rundown, but it was indispensable in a city without many other affordable options. Malik told Emily about the mold tests his firm had paid to have conducted (positive; Millennia contested the results), the long fights in City Council, a building official who condemned the property and fixes that seemed to never come. He gave her a word of advice: document everything. And get a mold test.

At the lawyer’s suggestion, the Palm Beach County Tenants Union reached out to Emily via Twitter, their official account run by a non-tenant organizer named Adam Wasserman.

“We’ve talked to tenants at many of their properties all over: Atlanta, Kansas City, Columbus, Memphis,” Adam wrote to her. “It’s always the same conditions.”

They were working to form a national Millennia tenants union. If successful, the cross-country Millennia union would be among the first of its kind to link tenants across the properties of a single owner. There had been some action. It had stalled.

“I mean there’s generations of families here who have seen people try and fight to get these buildings up to code, but nothing major ever came about,” she wrote.

“I think that’s exactly the point we try to make with the tenants,” Adam wrote back. “As long as slumlords run this property, things will never get better.”



## Chapter 2

**'They just felt like those people want to live like that'**

### ***Riviera Beach, Florida***

When Crystal Lewis' oldest daughter was 8, she told her mother she was done with school.

"I'm not going," Nyviana said, sitting at the kitchen table of their ground-floor unit in 2017. The family lived in a HUD-funded complex called Stonybrook in Riviera Beach, Fla., just 9 miles from Mar-a-Lago. Nyviana's 7-year-old sister nodded in agreement.

"Why?" Crystal asked.

"They always pick at us," Nyviana said. The other kids called her dirty and nasty for living in Stonybrook. And the kids weren't wrong, she said. Crystal knew the place was nasty.

Crystal did know. Her three daughters avoided the complex, with its fading yellow walls and green doors, as much as they could. After school, three times a week, they badgered Crystal to drive them over to Palm Beach Gardens to play. They did not want to play in the Stonybrook playground.

Nyviana felt it especially hard at school, where she was laughed at for being so poor that she lived in the place with the roaches. Her grades slipped. She stopped doing her homework. Nyviana was the child who had always been the most energetic of her siblings, the child who liked to get up early in the morning to lay out everyone's school clothes and the child who followed Crystal around the apartment to ask how she could help. She got quiet at home. She stopped answering questions in class.

Crystal Lewis and her family had lived in Stonybrook, a 256-unit complex with multiple two-story buildings in uncomfortable proximity to industrial plants, since May 2012. The girls may have hated it, but they did not have much choice. Crystal had been charged with assault, battery and robbery (all dropped) over a 12-year span. In Crystal's fifth year at Stonybrook, as her daughters complained, she started researching the property, its history, and its owners — the beginning of what she would call her footwork. The sixth year, she knocked on doors. By her seventh year on the property, Crystal had set up a desk under the front window in the living room, covered with notebooks, file folders and a free-standing desk sign that said "Home" in silver script. She quit her job as a restaurant server and took organizing as a full-time job. Nyviana watched as her mother rallied other tenants. She thought there might be some hope of her life getting better. She started to perk up.



A building at Stonybrook Apartments in Florida caught fire in 2018. Repairs were not started until two years later.

(Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

In April 2012, just before Crystal moved to the property, a new owner took over. A nonprofit called Global Ministries Foundation, run by evangelist/investor Rev. Richard Hamlet, bought the complex. Four years later, conditions were so bad in its multi-property Florida portfolio that Sen. Marco Rubio called Hamlet a “slumlord.” HUD forced Global Ministries out. Millennia took over, adding 37 Global Ministries properties to its management portfolio with the aim of buying them all. It was a daunting task, even for a company touting itself as a rehabber. The portfolio was old and had suffered years of neglect that added on to the normal wear and tear.

Rubio toured another Florida property formerly owned by Global Ministries after Millennia took over. He told the tenants that better times were coming. He vowed that they would not have to live like this much longer. That’s what made Crystal angriest, as the years dragged on and nothing seemed to change.

“You can lie to me; you can lie to my husband. We’re old enough. We understand our feelings,” she said. “But to lie to the babies that’s looking up to you — all of you guys that came on the grounds of Stonybrooks and promised these kids a change. Those babies, they were so happy.”

In July 2018, the Riviera Beach code official, Ladi March, inspected the complex unit by unit. Ladi had grown up in Riviera Beach. After she graduated college, she became a general contractor. She worked her way up the chain. When she was hired as a city building official, she was the first Black woman ever in the role. If she screwed up, she thought, there wouldn’t be anyone else who looked like her in the job again for 20 years. And in any cases of structural failures that cost lives, the building official always took the blame.

Her Stonybrook report cited roach infestations, expired fire extinguishers, broken smoke detectors, dark substances that looked like mold and inoperable air conditioners. She had air quality concerns based on an asbestos report. She saw mold treated with bleach and painted over. She met tenants who said they felt sick when they were in their homes. She tagged the worst units as unsafe, pasting bright-orange tags on the windows of condemned units. The tags triggered code liens.



When Nyviana Stukes, left, was 8 years old, she told her mother, Crystal Lewis, that she did not want to go to school any more because kids teased her about living in Stonybrook. (Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

The problem was bigger than one building official in one city, Ladi thought. HUD set up minimum rules on the federal level such as working electricity and smoke detectors, with the expectation that there'd be tighter building codes at the state and local level. For that system to work, cities had to not only create codes but enforce them. She knew that if she condemned the entire property, she might start what one Riviera Beach councilwoman called "a homeless situation." No one wanted that.

She felt unsupported by several of her city colleagues.

"They just felt like those people want to live like that and forget it," she said. "And I just, I don't understand and didn't understand where that kind of conditioning comes from. Have you just seen the property in disrepair for so many years that you're just immune to it?"

Twenty days after Ladi's inspection, Crystal and other Stonybrook tenants filed an emergency court petition for immediate relocation. They were represented by Malik Leigh, the attorney who would contact Emily Hunter as she tweeted about Sandpiper Cove from Galveston. Their motion was denied. (Almost a year later, they would file a class action, alleging mold, rats and neglect by managers and city officials who the tenants said knew about the problems but simply wouldn't do anything.)

The fallout from Ladi's inspection exploded at Riviera Beach City Council meetings.

Millennia's co-founder and CEO Frank Sinito came down to one August 2018 meeting himself to make the company's case. He didn't come alone. Millennia executives flew down. The company paid to fly in tenants from other properties who spoke out in support of the company and the rehabs that had changed their lives. Frank told the City Council how he had been drawn to affordable housing by the "mission of making a difference in people's lives." Millennia sought out and transformed the worst of the worst. But they did not seek out Stonybrook.

"I didn't ask to buy the GMF portfolio. I was recruited to buy the GMF portfolio. When I look at it now, I ... I regret it," Frank said at the council meeting. "I look at the opposition that we have here this evening — and you'll hear plenty of that — I only hope and pray that after you hear the opposition, whether it's opposition in Opa-Locka or Kansas City, that you'll allow me to ... to come back up here and speak."

Millennia touted its construction plans. A Riviera Beach resident pointed out that they had heard the same plans from Global Ministries, down to the local attorney the companies hired to represent them.

The then-mayor of Riviera Beach, Thomas Masters, had just returned from a trip to Opa-Locka, a small town 70 miles south of Riviera Beach with a Millennia complex called Cordoba Courts. One of the most prominent Opa-Locka tenant activists, Shalonda Rivers, had agreed to come to the Riviera Beach City Council meeting with him. (A year later she would testify before a U.S. House subcommittee hearing about safety in HUD housing. She would detail what she called the slum conditions at her Millennia-owned apartment complex, where mold crept through showers and babies breathed from ventilators.)

The mayor did not like what he had seen.

The mayor said he saw buckets under leaking air conditioners and dripping faucets. He traveled to Atlanta and told City Council it was “one of the most deplorable housing units I've ever seen in my life.” He read a news story out of Kansas City about a roof falling down and injuring a 16-year-old girl at property called Englewood.

“Can't no one in this room tell me anything about Millennia that I don't know,” he said. “I cannot support Millennia as owners or managers because of what I have seen.”

He added: “I told HUD exactly what I thought about them, which I blame them also, because they are responsible to a great extent.”

Millennia's main arguments boiled down to this: Millennia was just the manager, coming in thanks to HUD. It did not own the property yet, and major funding had to come from the owner. But it would own the property, and when it did, it would be transformed. Some city officials pushed back. Wasn't the manager responsible for basic repairs and safety issues? They weren't asking for a renovation yet. Just habitability.

As the debate unfolded in council, Amy Pettway, community economic development project manager for the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, sent a letter to HUD, asking for vouchers to get the tenants out of the apartments. HUD never gave them. She doesn't know why. (HUD declined to provide an explanation.)

“We find no merit in Millennia's proposal to buy and rehabilitate the property (a project that will take two years), in light of its current failure to remedy life-safety conditions,” she wrote. “City officials and many

residents lack confidence in the property ever being rendered safe, given the decades of neglect and deterioration.”

Ladi saw the deterioration and wanted to fix it, but the Stonybrook case overwhelmed her. She would get home from work and lie in her bed and have a panic attack. She wound up being admitted to the hospital. A criminal charge, later dropped, alleged she misrepresented herself as she hadn't passed her full licensing test to be a building inspector. Ladi and her attorneys say the city knew she had a provisional and was working to pass the tests. Then, after the charge had been dropped, the city accused her of improperly issuing permits unrelated to Stonybrook. She was fired. Ladi filed a lawsuit against the city, alleging retaliation. The suit is ongoing.



During her time as a building official for Riviera Beach, Fla., Ladi March repeatedly flagged the living conditions at Stonybrook Apartments.

(Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

Even out of office, she followed the Stonybrook debate. She wishes she'd fought harder. She saw the City Council vote to enter into a settlement with Millennia, imposing a fine and releasing the company from the rest of the code liens. Two years after her inspections, the half-ripped-off orange tags still graced the windows

of the building. A member of the tenants' union called the code fines the "only available leverage now to get repairs done."

As part of the settlement, the city agreed to strike all unsafe building violations so that Millennia could get financing and begin what everyone wanted: to finally rehab the property.

Crystal also was exhausted. She went to council meeting after council meeting and rallied other tenants. She had her five children to care for. Her situation escalated. Malik hired a firm to test the units for mold. When he was there, he said, a property manager called the cops on him.

In November 2019, Crystal was served an eviction notice. She alleged it was for retaliation and said she was intentionally withholding her rent pending repairs; Millennia alleged it was for nonpayment. (In his letter responding to Chronicle questions, Frank wrote that Millennia "only evicts tenants when it is justified by the terms of the lease and HUD programs.")

The tenants union seemed to fracture. The vice president, a woman named Edna House, had come to City Council in November. It was not Edna's first time at council — she had gone to the lectern before to decry the conditions at Stonybrook — but this time, Edna recanted.

She said she had taken it upon herself to talk to the property manager, who sat behind her in the audience. She saw improvements at the property.

"It's a lot of lies being spread," she said. "I just don't, I don't see the safety hazards in these apartments."

Everything seemed to fall apart at once. The class-action suit looked like it was dissolving, as her attorney was repeatedly warned and, eventually, sanctioned by the court after accusations of unprofessional conduct (unfairly, he contests). And two months after Crystal was given an eviction notice, she and her family were removed from their apartment by the sheriff's department on Jan. 16, 2020.

When they were evicted from Stonybrook, Crystal and her husband moved their five children into two ground-floor motel rooms, their possessions stuffed into boxes and suitcases lining the walls. They paid their hotel rent on donations. In February, Crystal took stock of her money. She had seven days of rent left.

But even as she tried to figure out how to keep her family from the street, she heard new allegations. They came in the form of a sworn statement, given by a woman who had worked as an assistant property manager at Stonybrook, and thought she knew why Edna might have flipped.



Six months after Tashanequea Culpepper, 44, moved back into her apartment in Opa-locka, Fla., the mold came back.

(Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

### Chapter 3

**‘Most farmers have better living quarters for their hogs’**

#### ***Kansas City, Missouri***

Dan Fowler pulled the hood of his gray windbreaker up. A cockroach had already fallen perilously close to his head. He did not want one falling down his back.

It was early fall 2019, and the Kansas City, Mo., councilman was in a vacant unit in Englewood Apartments, one of several Millennia properties in the city. He’d gone on a tour of the complex with the city health department officials as they geared up to pass a new rental properties inspection ordinance. They handed out brochures about cockroaches. The city officials had gathered in the parking lot, comparing notes, when a woman walked up to them and asked what they were doing.



They were from the city, Dan explained. They were here to see how living conditions were. She asked if they had talked to the woman whose ceiling fell down.

No, Dan said. They hadn't. Could she introduce them?

A Millennia regional manager, who'd gone around the units with them, jumped in. It was just a little section of the ceiling, she said, maybe 2 feet. She had personally moved the woman out. They were fixing it. The city officials knocked on the door, but the unit was locked. She would go get the key.

While they waited, the tenant who had approached them in the parking lot came back.

"Did you talk to the man downstairs?" she asked. "His apartment's been wet for two months." They followed her to the unit in question. The man's carpet was so wet it squished. They looked around the unit and saw what looked like black mold where the A/C unit was. "Did you tell anyone?" Dan asked. The man had, several times. Nothing was fixed.

By the time the Millennia manager got the key to the apartment with the hole in the ceiling, the tenant living there had answered the door for the city officials. The family had not, in fact, moved out, and it was not a 2-foot hole. It was nearly the entire ceiling. The insulation had fallen into the apartment. Dan could see the tips where it had, once, been yellow. Otherwise, it was nearly black.

He had first inspected the units in late July 2018 and been equally horrified. When he had returned to his computer after his first trip to Englewood, Dan fired off an email to other Kansas City officials:

"Most farmers have better living quarters for their hogs."

A month after his first look at the complex, he would receive an email from a former property manager, who was at Englewood up to the day of the inspection. She had been fired for unrelated reasons; when he forwarded the email to city staff, he warned them to be skeptical. She wrote that Millennia's statement about not knowing the ceiling fell in was untrue; she herself had done an incident report. She had emailed higher-ups "concerning mold, flooding and other issues."

"Millennia has other properties with issues as well," she wrote.

Dan had known about Englewood just from growing up in Kansas City. Children who grew up at the property 20 years ago were called "burnt cockroaches" and "Englehood kids" at school. But he didn't get involved in it

as a councilman until Millennia officials contacted him to ask for a meeting to show him their plans for the complex. They set the meeting for Jan. 17, 2018.

To prepare, Dan had called the Kansas City Police Department, asking to speak to an officer focused on crime prevention in apartments. The police sent over officer Christina Ludwig, who brought a log of calls for service about an inch thick. She said, “Dan, this place is a pit.”



Inspectors from HUD photographed sewage in a sink and broken ceilings at Englewood Apartments in Kansas City.

Management didn't cooperate with her, she told him, and when she finally found one who did, that person didn't get support from the corporate office in Ohio and left quickly.

“It's been nice knowing you. I hope Englewood turns around. My last day is today,” one of the managers emailed Christina in November 2017. By the January 2018 meeting, Christina she had worked with 10 different property managers.

Christina had tried. She sent emails to Millennia's security director, a former police chief named Tom Strausborger.

“Nothing, and I mean nothing, has changed on this property since our last meeting while you were in town,” she emailed in September 2017. The apartments were “disgusting” and “uninhabitable”; she had heard vendors were not getting paid.

“No one should have to live like this,” she went on. “Someone within this company needs to give this property, and whoever is overseeing it, some much needed attention, preferably without delay. Like I said, these tenants do not deserve to live like this.” Three weeks later, she followed up. She hadn’t heard back.

At the January 2018 meeting, Millennia executives showed Dan the blueprints for remodeled buildings and said that because they had not secured tax credits, they could not start the improvements. (At the time, the state had suspended its tax credit program, which gave developers tax breaks for buying and rehabilitating affordable housing). The blueprints looked nice, Dan agreed. But what were they doing about it now?

The councilman had seen enough. City officials went back, going unit by unit. Dan saw a child living in what looked like black mold whose mother said he had to go to the hospital for breathing problems. When he opened the door to another unit’s interior closet, mold lined every shelf. In a vacant unit, where the cockroach fell from the ceiling, he stepped in human feces. He cussed out the manager until Christina stepped in front of him and told him to walk away.

On a rainy Wednesday at the beginning of September 2018, Kansas City and HUD officials met with Millennia reps in a room of the Kansas City Police Department’s North Patrol Headquarters, where Christina was based. Frank Sinito himself came down and apologized. He was embarrassed, he said. They would do better. They were having trouble keeping property managers until the place got cleaned up. They needed the state’s tax credits. He pledged to start rehab the minute they got approved.

Dan walked out into the rain with the city manager. They saw a black Lincoln town car parked next to a black SUV. A chauffeur in a black suit stood next to each. Dan turned to the city manager and said, “Look! They’re making some money off this.”

“Yeah,” the city manager said. “Don’t tell me there isn’t money in section 8 housing. Somebody’s making it, and it ain’t us.”

Later, Dan would find out that the Millennia representatives drove the black cars to Englewood for their own tour, accompanied by their umbrella-holding drivers. Dan was disgusted. To him, management was saying:

“We’re rich, you’re poor, let me shove your face in it.”

Frank did not address specific questions about the conditions Dan found in Englewood, or the use of the town cars. He wrote the company acknowledged that Englewood needed “substantial rehabilitation” — one of the reasons Millennia had wanted to purchase it in the first place.

City officials debated what to do. The city could have revoked Millennia’s landlord license, a Kansas City requirement to do business, but that would have put the tenants on the streets. There wasn’t enough affordable housing for them.

Council had just passed a new “Healthy Homes” ordinance meant to ensure quality-of-living standards, but it faced the same dilemma Galveston officials had. Their building code inspection ordinance didn’t include HUD housing. So Dan wrote an amendment to the ordinance allowing the city to inspect HUD properties and hold them to city standards. It passed in 2019.

As he worked on rewriting the code, Dan got an email with a link to an emergency request for tenants’ relocation filed in West Palm Beach, Fla. It was about Stonybrook, and it would be denied by the court. Dan forwarded the email to 12 other Kansas City officials on a Sunday night.

“It seems they have problems there, too,” he wrote. “I’m starting to wonder about their other properties around here.”

The city attorney, Emalea Black, replied the next day. She wrote: “The similarities are striking.”

The HUD official most closely overseeing Englewood was Ed Manning, the director of HUD’s Kansas City Multifamily Division, an Army veteran with four tours in Germany, one tour in Italy and a combat deployment in Afghanistan behind him. True to his Massachusetts roots, he had a Bill Belichick quote in his email signature for much of 2018 (“Do your job”) and pronounced “apartments” without the “r.” He worked out of HUD’s Southwest region, in the same HUD division that oversaw Sandpiper Cove down in Texas. He attended meetings with the city and Frank and kept in touch with Emalea. Most of his frustrations for the next two years would play out over email.

Emalea reported to Ed that the city had gone back out in late September 2018 for a re-inspection and found several violations. He shot back a two-word response: “Classic Millennia!”

When Ed visited Englewood in late February 2019, he expected to see more.

“I am less than pleased when we visited on Friday,” he wrote to Emalea. “The first building is nowhere near complete. Frank assured me work would begin in Feb regardless of tax credit closing. Indeed on 1 Feb when we went out to see they had started gutting but then apparently stopped claiming no permit. I think he blew smoke and had no intention of starting early.” He sent an email saying as much to Millennia.



Kansas City councilman Dan Fowler thinks there should be more consequences for owners who do not fix dilapidated apartments.

(Earl Richardson/Contributor | Houston Chronicle)

On May 9, 2019 — three months after the planned start date — he wrote another email to Emalea, detailing a meeting with a new Millennia VP.

“It is apparent to me Frank Sinito deceived us during our 3 December 2018 call in which he promised to start rehab work in February,” he wrote. “As with previous meetings with senior Millenia leadership she seemed indifferent to our concerns.”

Ed learned that a roof had collapsed at Englewood the same week he spoke to the new Millennia executive. (Back in 2018, he’d observed that building as being particularly uninhabitable.) He was not happy with what he found at his next inspection on May 16. Frank replied with an apology and an assurance: “This development is our first priority.”

When Ed forwarded the email to Kansas City officials, he added his own opinion: “Not very strong and I am concerned rehab is nearly 100 days behind schedule.”

Three months later, on Aug. 30, Ed visited again. He found the conditions “exactly the same,” he wrote in an email to Frank. The project, he wrote, was over six months behind schedule. He had seen two occupied units without power and raw sewage pooling on the floor and piling up in a kitchen sink. HUD reached out to the Missouri agency administering the federal housing tax credits Millennia had won and asked for a meeting. (“They appear to be reusing old and damaged material and we noted moisture and mold on the sheet rock,” Ed wrote in a September email to the Missouri housing agency.)

By then, Ed had had enough. On Sept. 4, he wrote a letter to Millennia, demanding that they hire a different management company rather than doing it themselves.

“You have allowed unsatisfactory physical conditions to exist at the property for the past three years without any meaningful abatement of the deficiencies,” he wrote.

The company appealed. A higher-up in HUD’s Southwest region, the region overseeing Sandpiper Cove, shot it down. Dan was thrilled.

The change never happened. Even through allegations of mismanagement by an ex-employee, continuing complaints at another Millennia-owned, Kansas City property, and a full HUD investigation into Englewood, Millennia remained.

Dan was furious. There seemed to be no way to get Millennia to do better and no way to get it out. But in September 2019, a former Millennia employee at Englewood went to the local Fox affiliate. She had the rent rolls. There was a problem.



Kansas City Councilman Dan Fowler is pleased with the rehabilitation of Englewood Apartments. However, he doesn't understand how HUD let it slip so far in the first place. (Earl Richardson/Contributor | Houston Chronicle)

## **Chapter 4**

**'So our reports look good'**

### ***Riviera Beach, Florida***

On the day of the Christmas event that Stonybrook management put on for tenants, a new employee of the subsidized housing complex heard something that felt wrong.

It felt so wrong that she would raise it with The Millennia Companies' human resources department. And she would provide a sworn statement detailing what she heard, recorded while she was still employed by the company. Her statement would accuse Millennia employees at Stonybrook of the same abuses raised by tenants and city officials around the country for years.

It was a Saturday in December 2019. The employee had worked at the Riviera Beach complex for just over a month. She was still getting to know all of the tenants. She chatted with Edna House. Edna had once been the vice president of the tenants' union, but she had spoken out against them at last month's City Council meeting and praised the improvements she saw at Stonybrook.

What Edna said next might have explained why she had changed her statements about Millennia. It was a flip-flop no one in the tenants' union had been able to figure out. When they found out, they were livid.

At the Christmas event, Edna told the employee that she was close with Stonybrook's property manager, Amanda Delmont. Amanda had done her a few favors, Edna said.

"Amanda was having her make statements basically for gifts, in return for gifts, in return for a job, clothing, babysitting, you name it," the then-employee said in her statement. She has asked to remain anonymous because she has a domestic violence restraining order against a man who may soon be released from prison.

A month later, the employee was working in the food pantry and spoke to Edna again. Edna said Amanda would give her gifts and favors to help the company with its pending evictions against Crystal Lewis and others, according to the statement. (Neither Amanda nor Edna responded to interview requests.)

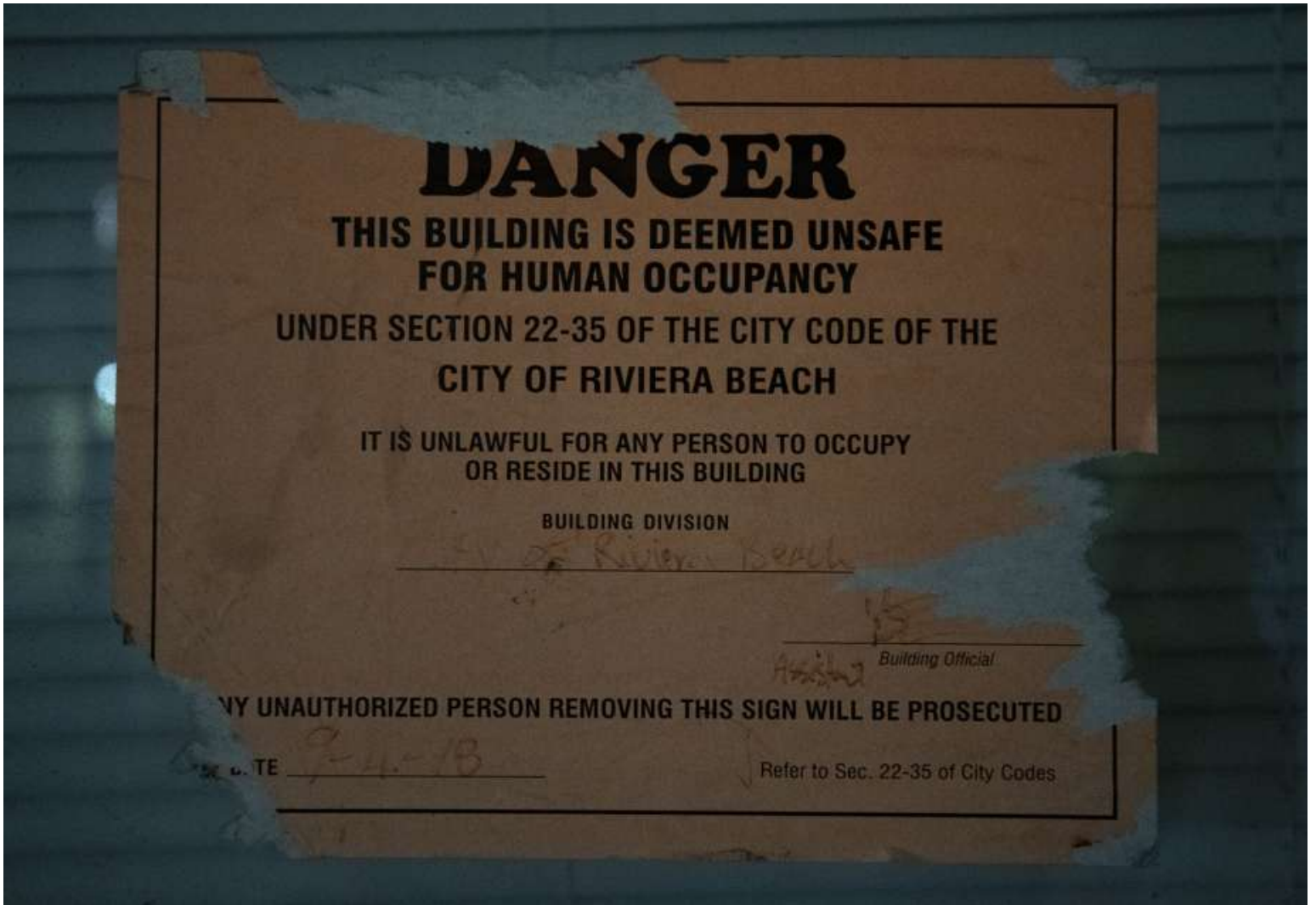
At 6 p.m. on Feb. 6, 2020, the then-employee gave her sworn statement before a court reporter at her apartment. She had spread the documents out on her bed; the court reporter sat in a chair. A cat paced the hot room.

The statement concluded two hours and 10 minutes later. Her allegations ranged from Stonybrook staff backdating official HUD documents to putting tenants in unsafe units. She alleged she'd had a tenant call who had moved out and called to make sure she wasn't being charged. The Stonybrook ledger, she said, showed the tenant was active.

"They're also closing work orders without doing them so our reports look good so it reflects well on the company," the employee said in her sworn statement. "I was told that when we see missing smoke detectors, just to write it on a notepad and not write it on the inspection sheets and also not to create a work order so it doesn't show that we're not providing smoke detectors."

She went into one first-floor unit, she said, with a man from a mold remediation company who told her to "be careful because it's a dangerous unit."





In 2018, Ladi March tagged units in Stonybrook as uninhabitable. Two years later, a half-ripped off tag was still stuck to the window.

(Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

“We’re actually moving somebody in tomorrow morning with four children, and we’ve never remediated the problems,” she said. “The lady has, I think, four children under the age of 10 and she doesn’t know — she’s not aware what’s going on.”

The problem was never fixed, she alleged. The family moved into the unit.

The former Stonybrook employee, still working for Millennia at the time, printed out emails, rent rolls allegedly for tenants who had moved out and work orders that allegedly had not been done. She sent emails to HR, alleging harassment from the property manager and detailing what she had explained in her statement. On the morning of the Thursday she gave her sworn statement, she said, she brought the documents to the FBI field office in Miami.

The FBI declined to comment. The employee said she was later fired. Millennia CEO Frank Sinito did not respond to questions about the then-employee's accusations or her termination. He could not, he wrote, comment on personnel matters.

The former Stonybrook employee's documents and her statement were filed with Crystal's lawsuit against Millennia over the complex's conditions. Millennia argued the documents were illegally obtained and successfully moved to have them sealed. Crystal's lawyer, Malik Leigh, was sanctioned by the court for improperly contacting the former employee and using the documents she had printed out. The judge had imposed a gag order — meaning that no one could talk about the case. Crystal was sanctioned for breaking it.

As the case dragged, looking more and more hopeless until its eventual dismissal by the court, which said the plaintiffs had with limited exception failed to meet the requirements to bring a claim. As her case fell apart, Crystal and her family spent the first months of 2020 living week-to-week in motels. She had an eviction on her record now on top of the criminal history, making it difficult to get approved for an apartment. She started looking for shelters, just in case, as the coronavirus pandemic raged. Money would run out, another donor would step in and they would be safe for seven more days. As the week wound down, her frantic search would begin again.



Crystal Lewis and her family lived week-to-week in a motel after getting evicted from Stonybrook. (Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

In May, the family got approved for an apartment. They moved in on the 14th. Crystal hung seashell-patterned shower curtains and shimmering silver beads between the kitchen and the living room. She and her husband drive for Uber. Her oldest daughter, the one who had first sat her down and told her she could not abide life in Stonybrook all those years ago, helped her wave signs for Biden ahead of the election. She kept up her work with Palm Beach County Tenants Union.

On Saturday, Dec. 5, Crystal logged on to a Zoom call. She would be joined by 25 people in over a dozen cities. All of them lived in or organized in Millennia properties. They compared notes (feeling “jerked around,” squalid conditions, properties placed in primarily Black and brown areas, the difficulties of organizing, the extra difficulties of organizing in a pandemic). They reconvened in February.

The rehab of Stonybrook — to be rebranded Azure Estates — had begun with a renovation price tag of \$17 million. The local NBC affiliate posted a segment in November on Azure Estates “wiping away the negative history” of Stonybrook. The anchors took viewers into a newly rehabbed apartment, outfitted with gleaming

white cabinets, a new microwave and freshly painted walls. The renderings show a shiny new community center. The project is over 50 percent complete.

Amy Pettway, the attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, looked at the renderings progress and felt hopeful that maybe, finally, there would be change. Crystal wondered why it had taken so long, with such a high cost to her family.



Crystal Lewis, her husband and their five children lived in two hotel rooms after being evicted from Stonybrook.

(Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

## Chapter 5

**'It's less than human'**

### ***Kansas City, Missouri***

As the Kansas City Health Department inspected and reinspected Englewood, the HUD office of inspector general began an investigation of its own. It would take nearly a year.

It launched as the local Fox affiliate reported a whistleblower had reached out [in September 2019](#), pointing out two signatures for the same tenant. One, the ex-employee alleged, was signed after the tenant had died. The two signatures did not match.

Dan Fowler, the Kansas City councilman, could not understand why, between the constant citations, slow renovations, and now, irregular rent rolls, Millennia was still managing the property. Ed Manning, the director of HUD's Kansas City Multifamily Division, had ordered them to find a new management company in fall 2019. They had not.

City officials reached out to the office of a local congressman, Sam Graves, to try to figure out what had happened. On Jan. 17, 2020, a HUD Office of Congressional & Intergovernmental Relations employee wrote back to Graves' staffer.

"The property owner for the Englewood Apartments is meeting all requirements and is in compliance with all regulations," she wrote. "HUD has worked with the owner and does not see reason to enforce this order at this time."

At a meeting after the city officials figured out HUD wouldn't be replacing Millennia as the management company after all, Dan could not get a straight answer on who made the decision. ("It was inconceivable to me that they couldn't all of a sudden remember who did what or who said what," Dan said. "Somebody had to sign something.")

But even as one HUD employee assured Congress and, in turn, Kansas City, that everything at Englewood was going according to plan, others in the agency knew it was not. Ed was continuing to send emails to the city attorney for Kansas City, asking for updates and criticizing the company for "over promising and under

delivering.” Another HUD inspector noted that “workmanship was very poor or below average ... numerous areas of mold still present in all three buildings during our inspection that appeared to be painted over.” And HUD’s office of inspector general was gathering thread for the Englewood audit.

HUD released a 54-page audit of Millennia’s practices at Englewood on June 8, 2020. The investigation covered 2016 to 2018 (a time span in which Englewood collected over \$2.2 million in tenant subsidies). Inspectors found the company collected \$24,295 in federal subsidies it could not support with documentation — and over \$377,000 that the company never should have had.

HUD found the company was not verifying tenants’ income, not performing routine physical inspections and not asking for documentation like Social Security cards. As Kansas City police officer Christina Ludwig had years before, HUD noted the exceptionally high turnover rate in property management. HUD verified that Millennia had processed paperwork with a dead tenant’s signature.

Millennia contested the findings in response to HUD, arguing that auditors had not examined enough files to have reliable findings. The Millennia response pointed out improvements it had made and pledged to work with HUD, although it disagreed on repayment amounts. The company objected to being potentially disciplined for “actions taken by many people no longer with the Management Agent.” And there was a note of caution: Administrative actions would make it harder for Millennia to rehab the property.

In a letter to HUD, Millennia CEO Frank Sinito wrote that the audit had prompted the company to review its practices. To the Chronicle, he wrote, “Millennia has instituted greater oversight to ensure the regular inspection of vacant units, hired a new property management and maintenance team, and underwent monitoring and assessments.”

Ed emailed a HUD colleague in July, after the audit was released. He pointed out a recommendation on page 12 for HUD to take “appropriate administrative actions, up to and including debarment.” If debarred, Millennia would not be eligible for HUD contracts.

Nothing has happened.

Dan gives credit where it is due. Englewood is improving now. But he wonders how HUD let it fall so far, and why Millennia started work only when the city cracked down.

“To let people live in those conditions — it’s less than human,” he said. “HUD needs to look at its regulations and start enforcing them. Why in the flying hell did it get in that place, that condition, in the first place?”

As Englewood entered what the city hoped was its closing stage of a rehab, miles away, at a property called Gabriel Tower, tenants began to protest. It was June 2020, the summer heat was building and their air conditioning had gone out.



Trent Tyler has lived in Gabriel Tower in Kansas City for four years. His bathroom is being renovated due to mold damage.

(Earl Richardson/Contributor | Houston Chronicle)

The newly formed Gabriel Tower tenant union, working with organizers from the citywide union KC Tenants, researched Millennia. They found the same headlines Emily Hunter had when she sat in her room in Galveston. They found Crystal Lewis and the Palm Beach County Tenants Union and reached out. They lobbied city officials.

Like an Englewood redux, local television stations came out to film pooling water and substances that looked like mold. A city councilman’s staffer asked HUD officials to relocate the tenants. They did not.

“Here we go,” Ed wrote to his colleague who had forwarded him an email from the councilman’s office. He’d heard complaints about the property before. Almost a year to the day before the A/C set off the latest protests, he had visited Gabriel Tower. He had seen a disabled tenant who had been without a functioning tub or shower for 60 days. To keep clean, the tenant bathed in the sink. (Millennia did not respond directly to any questions about Gabriel Tower.)

On Dec. 9, the Kansas City Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority — the city’s urban renewal agency that can grant tax incentives for development, as it had for Millennia — held its weekly meeting over Zoom. It had to decide what to do with Gabriel Tower. A representative from a firm hired to do mold testing explained the results positive for mold, unable to determine exactly when it had come in.

Top Millennia executives and HUD officials, including Ed, tuned in. He did not speak much. When he did, he said: “We continue to work with Millennia, and they do respond to us.” His team worked with Millennia on multiple properties. Yes, there were challenges at Englewood. But many of them were not Millennia’s fault. “We have a proven track record of doing this around the country. And in Kansas City, you can see our transformation work at Englewood Apartments,” said Millennia president Lee Felgar, his connection fading in and out. Gabriel Tower was 50 years old. They had a mountain of work to do in a rehab. They had the same delay Englewood suffered because the state had suspended its tax credit program. They had fixed problems the city pointed out.

“I’m having a hard time understanding what has occurred within the last four years to remediate any blighting conditions that would have existed when this project was approved,” said a City Council member. “And some of my concern here is that the repairs that have been made in the last month or so, were because the LCRA stepped in and said, ‘We’re going to bring an inspector in, we’re going to have this mold testing done.’” That, said Lee, was just not true. As a responsible owner, they would bring in funds to repair issues that the property couldn’t pay for on its own revenue stream. They did not neglect the property. It was, he repeated, an old building. Old buildings had problems.

“That’s what I’m trying to wrap my mind around,” said another city board member. “It seems OK, just listening to the conversation, it really seems that it’s a never-ending period of time to remediate the building. It just seems like it just keeps getting extended and extended and extended. And now, we’re talking about even more incentives to get the job done.”



Millennia's local lawyer unmuted her mic. She made the same argument Millennia had made in response to HUD threatening action over the audit; to impose administrative action had the potential of slowing down the rehab everyone wanted.

The board could either declare Millennia in default by revoking its tax credit or wait to see if the company made improvements. Board members went into executive session. When they came back, they voted to hold Millennia in default.



Residents of Gabriel Tower organized with the help of advocates from KC Tenants. In front is Rick Loker, a resident of the apartments for the past two years. Back row from left: Tiana Caldwell of KC Tenants; Trent Tyler, a four-year-resident; Jack Sisson, a resident for seven years; Ronald McMillan, a resident for six years; Donnie DeBarge, a resident for two months; and Wilson Vance of KC Tenants. (Earl Richardson/Contributor | Houston Chronicle)



Kansas City officials took away the tax break Millennia had for Gabriel Tower after tenants complained that the building was uninhabitable.

(Earl Richardson/Contributor | Houston Chronicle)

## Chapter 6

**‘You gotta keep making noise’**

### ***Galveston, Texas***

When HUD officials made their rounds at Galveston to visit Sandpiper Cove in 2019, they did not like what they saw.

Sandpiper Cove had passed a HUD inspection in 2016 with a high score, a year after Millennia bought it. In 2019, HUD inspected the property again. It failed.

Another 2019 inspection, administered through a contractor and meant to look more at bookkeeping and management procedures, noted uncorrected physical conditions that had been pointed out in past HUD

inspections. There were exposed wires, missing fire extinguishers, open work orders. The property, the inspector noted, had a “bleak appearance.”

On his way home from the property, a HUD official fired off a quick email to his colleagues in Fort Worth — cc'ing the same woman Ed Manning, the HUD official working on Englewood, reported to from Kansas City. “It appears that the owner/agent sent a crew out to clean up the property in preparation of our site visit,” he wrote on April 30. “There were recent ceiling patches, but it appears they are simply painting over potential mold rather than removing the drywall and treating the studs.” (A HUD inspector at Englewood had written a similar email after he saw mold that looked like it had been painted over.)

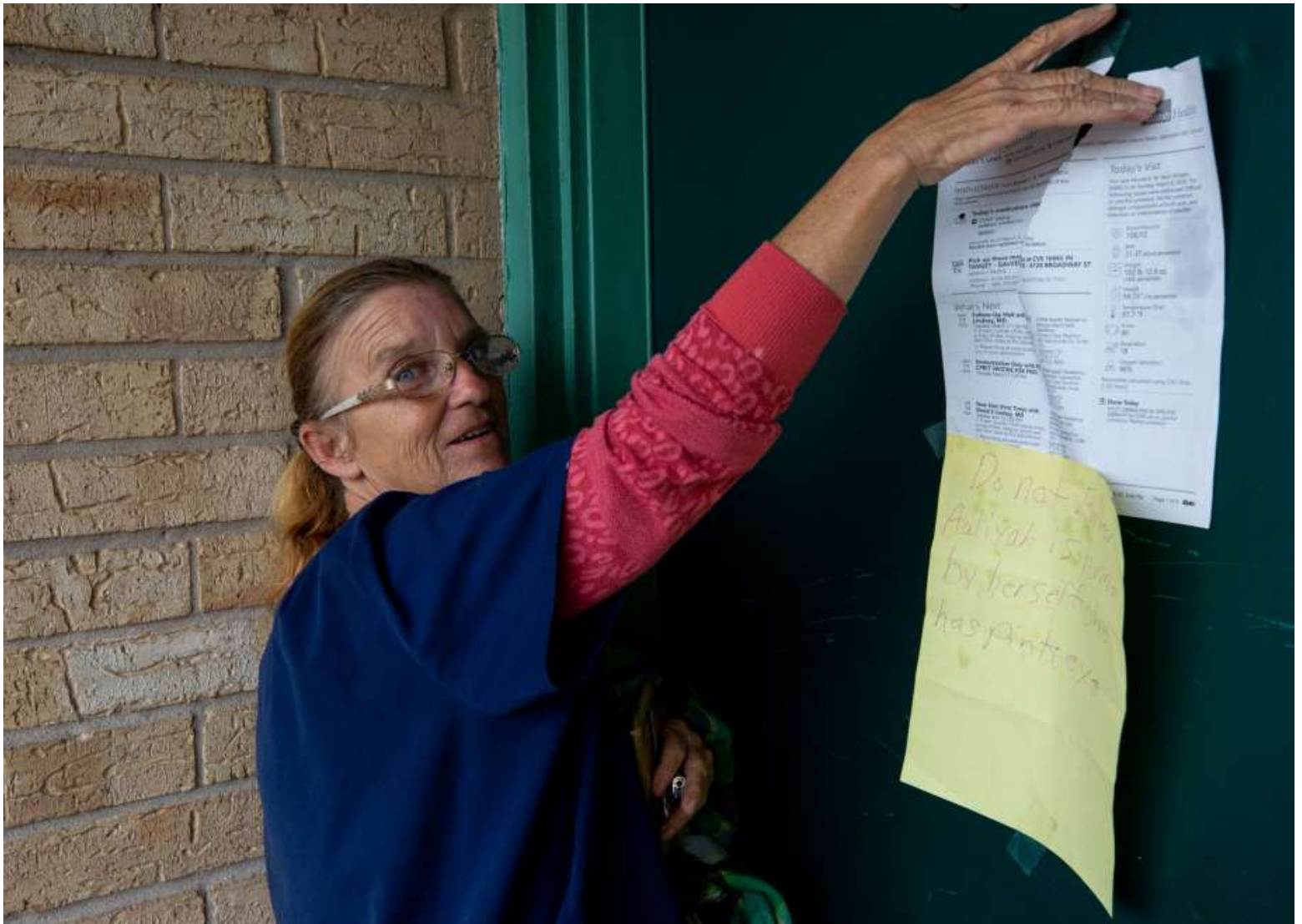
None of the bureaucracies involved — HUD, a HUD contractor that does inspections, the Texas state agency administering federal housing tax credits — was happy with Sandpiper.

The state tax credit agency referred the property for noncompliance issues and potential debarment. HUD’s regional inspection contractor went back and forth with the company, demanding corrections to record keeping and maintenance issues that stretched for months after the failing inspection. In a December visit, an inspector for the contract company wrote, “Did they replace the wood or just paint over it? My concern is that mildew will eventually seep through again.”

And HUD told Millennia that the company had to find another management group for the complex. Just like it would do in Kansas City, Millennia appealed — and was denied. But unlike in Kansas City, Millennia officials decided they were done. At the end of August 2019, they sent a letter to HUD. They would put the property up [for sale](#), pending a HUD-approved buyer.

“I am disappointed by the tenor of the communications taken by HUD, but you have all made your opposition clear,” Millennia CEO Frank Sinito wrote. “Our treatment in Kansas City, which is under the direction of HUD Southwest Office has been disturbing as well.”

Millennia still owned — and managed — the property through December 2019, when Tina Harris and other Sandpiper Cove tenants went to City Council and her daughter Aaliyah was hospitalized. After a tenant outcry, a top Millennia VP went to the property.



Tina Harris tapes the latest report from her daughter's hospital visit on their apartment door. (Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

“It’s been quite eventful walking units in the past 2 days ... guns, drugs, being videotaped, and having security to some units,” the VP, Connie Riley, wrote to Frank and two other top Millennia executives. “We tried to bridge the relationship with the residents most were not willing and very aggressive.”

She went to the first-floor unit of a woman named Cynthia Minix who had gone to City Council with Tina. During a March 2019 power outage, she’d had to buy oversized plastic syringes to feed her husband, unable to care for himself after a stroke, through his feeding tube. The vice president wrote: “She is one of the ring leaders.”

Emily Hunter was one of the tenants Connie referenced. When Millennia employees came to her door, she held her phone up and videoed. She was sick of constant inspections that felt retaliatory. She did not trust management. She had just received a notice to vacate and found an attorney with Lone Star Legal Aid. She

packed up her things and went to stay with her mother in Shreveport, a situation that would only last so long with their contentious relationship. She doesn't know where she'll end up.

Pending HUD approval, a company called the ITEX Group with offices in Houston and Port Arthur will buy Sandpiper. The city of Galveston sent a letter in support of state-issued tax credits. A new management agency is already in place. ITEX put together a 21-page PowerPoint for tenants detailing how it would rehab Sandpiper Cove. It would renovate the existing community building. It would install new lighting. It would deal with the sewer issues. It would resurface the sidewalks and spruce up the landscaping. It would replace the boilers and add ADA-compliant units.

Down to the brand of new appliances (Energy Star), the new owner presented the same plans Millennia had in its own PowerPoint, four years, four months and 29 days before.

Almost a year after she left Aaliyah in the ICU to speak to the Galveston City Council, Tina testified again. This time it was over Zoom, in front of a state agency administering potential new tax credits, with the help of low-income housing advocacy group Texas Housers. The tenants had gathered to ask that the agency not give any more new tax credits to a rehab of Sandpiper, even under new ownership. They wanted vouchers to leave.

“We need out of here. I mean, that is our biggest concern,” Tina said at the hearing, “because my daughter has been in the ICU.”

Lone Star Legal Aid had sued HUD on June 30 on behalf of the residents of Sandpiper Cove. The complaint cited failing HUD inspections, leaking roofs, mold and broken plumbing. Lone Star Legal Aid accused Millennia of failing to make repairs — and accused HUD of failing to hold them accountable. The case is dragging. It exhausts Tina.

At her last in-person doctor's visit before the pandemic, Aaliyah, 15, sat on the exam chair, kicking her legs, the stuffed rabbit she brought to every hospitalization and doctor's visit peeking out of her purse while Tina talked to the doctors. They got back the blood test from the ICU. It came back positive for mold and other allergens, including cockroaches. One of Aaliyah's doctors, David Lindsay, listed potential causes of her respiratory problems, then turned to the mold.



Aaliyah Lewis always takes her stuffed bunny rabbit with her to the doctor's office.  
(Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

“You don’t even need to hear it from me and that’s horrible for her,” he said. “She should be pulled out of the apartment ...”

“That’s what I keep saying ...”

“It’s probably part of the reason she’s having this,” the doctor said.

“And you’re talking about HUD housing,” Tina said. “This right here is what makes me mad because I spoke to those people and have tried to be as nice as I can ...”

“Just keep screaming,” the doctor said. “You gotta keep making noise.”

“If I don’t voice my opinion, who’s going to?” Tina said. “Who’s going to stand up and take up for us living in this situation? You know?”

They left the visit with a new inhaler.

Aaliyah's doctor checks in with her over Zoom. Aaliyah barely left her apartment all of 2020 because of the pandemic. She still has trouble breathing.

They keep Aaliyah's old bedroom closed off with a blanket shoved under it. Aaliyah still sleeps in Tina's old room; Tina still sleeps on the couch. When the temperature dropped in December, Tina ventured in to pick out winter clothes. She hadn't opened the door in weeks. A dark substance had gathered around it. There was a stink. Eventually, she thought, she'd have to throw everything away. Tina closed the door. She left the winter clothes in the closet. They would have to figure something else out.

Aaliyah Lewis walks through the Sandpiper Cove courtyard back to her apartment. She went to the hospital three times in a year for breathing problems.

(Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

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