

## Apartments crawling with mice, roaches but fearful tenants stay quiet

By Andrea Castillo, May 8 2016, California, USA

Luis Decubas keeps a tightly rolled pack of 17 mice in his freezer. It's proof of the pests contaminating the three-bedroom apartment in southeast Fresno that he shares with his wife and four children.

When he opens a kitchen cabinet, dozens of cockroaches fly out. Sometimes when the family wakes up at night, they can feel cockroaches tickling the inside of their ears.

The \$650-a-month apartment has other problems: exposed wires, holes in walls, faulty electric outlets, mold.

"We shouldn't be living like this," says Decubas, 47.

Their apartment is not an isolated case. Thousands of the city's poorest and most vulnerable people live in unhealthy and unsafe apartments. They stay silent because they fear being evicted or deported, and they continue to live in misery.

City officials knew for decades about problems with low-income housing. Property owners faced few repercussions from a city still reeling from the effects of the Great Recession that slashed deeply into code enforcement. But by refusing to put teeth into inspections and enforcement efforts, the city failed to protect many of its most at-risk citizens.

Fresno's low-income housing crisis was thrust into the spotlight last November with the news that a central Fresno apartment complex, home to 1,000 people, had neither heat nor hot water. Residents couldn't cook or keep their apartments warm at the coldest part of autumn. By the time officials learned about the gas line closure, tenants at Summerset Village Apartments had been cold and hungry for a week. One elderly tenant would later die of respiratory failure brought on by pneumonia.

The conditions at Summerset spurred The Bee to focus on substandard housing in Fresno. A four-month investigation by The Bee found that making Fresno apartments livable and safe was a very low priority for landlords and government officials. The Bee investigation also found:

- Some enforcement cases were closed before repairs were completed.
- There has never been a criminal consequence for landlords renting substandard apartments.
- In some apartments, toilets regularly overflow, soaking carpets with sewage.
- Rotted ceilings from water leaks were left unrepaired at many apartments.
- Ovens and portable heaters were the main source of heat in some apartments.
- Routine interior inspections, considered best practices in many cities, are not performed in Fresno.

City officials offer excuses for not moving aggressively to protect residents. The system is decidedly tilted in favor of landlords. When they appeal city fines, for example, judgments usually benefit them.