

West Palm Beach, Florida seniors face eviction from low income housing

By Matthew Taylor
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Low income seniors formerly living at the St. Andrews Residence in West Palm Beach, Florida are facing possible eviction from their temporary housing in the coming weeks. The residents of St. Andrews, a low-income senior living facility owned by the Episcopal diocese of Southeast Florida, were forced to leave the building after an electrical fire broke out in June that left the facility temporarily uninhabitable.

Of the residents who were displaced, 125 were placed in hotels in the area after the fire, with the rest going to live with friends or family. They continued to pay rent and were delivered the three daily meals that were included in their rent arrangement.

Last Sunday, according to the *Palm Beach Post*, the tenants of St. Andrews received a notice from SPM Management, which runs the facility on behalf of the diocese, that if the building did not conclude repairs and pass inspection by August 14, so residents could return home, they would no longer be accommodated in hotels and their meal service would also be cut off.

Through no fault of their own, the elderly residents of St. Andrews now face homelessness and hunger, amid the coronavirus pandemic, which has ravaged the senior population in the US and internationally. Already residents have been informed that one tenant, who is currently residing in a hotel, had tested positive for the virus.

As of Thursday, West Palm Beach and surrounding Palm Beach County have recorded 35,735 COVID-19 infections and 892 deaths. The state of Florida remains a hot spot for infections and deaths, reporting 7,650 new cases and 121 deaths on Thursday.

St. Andrews management has made no effort thus far to test its residents for coronavirus, instead instructing them to seek out tests from their own doctors. For many residents who do not have their own cars this is

impossible.

Jim Jensen, 77, who suffers from COPD and was placed in a local hotel told the *Palm Beach Post* that the news “had me quite upset because I could end up homeless...the thought that at 77 years old and being homeless for no reason is rather disturbing, I didn’t cause this.”

Another resident spoke to the *Post* anonymously because “I’m afraid I would be evicted. I’m scared to death of management.” They added that many residents “Don’t know where they are going to go. Some of them don’t have any family left. They have outlived their families. They are petrified.”

The initial displacement was highly disruptive on its own because many residents have no cars or are unable to drive. St. Andrews, like many similar facilities in other cities, is located downtown, making it easier for the residents to access stores, doctors’ offices, and other necessities. After being forced to leave after the fire in June they were spread around to various hotels in the area.

Additionally, the placement in hotels puts the seniors, already at a high risk of dying from COVID-19 if they contract the virus, in still greater peril due to the fact that area hotels have many guests from other states and counties, increasing the risk of coronavirus transmission.

According to the accounts of multiple residents who spoke to the *Palm Beach Post*, the facility has been in disrepair for years, with leaky pipes and electrical problems common, elevators that worked intermittently in the 15-story structure, and pervasive black mold throughout the building.

“I have had to purchase expensive air purifiers and special allergy filters which are costly to survive in my apartment,” 67-year-old resident Judy Collins told the

Post. “St. Andrews is always riding on the minimum to get by.”

Nancy Gregory, 75, told the *Post* that she moved out of the building last year due to extensive black mold. Residents also reported that the mold problem is so severe that it would coat clothing.

Many residents were also impacted when St. Andrews discontinued mail service to the facility last year, forcing them to pick up their mail at the nearest post office a mile away.

This is not the first time the building has experienced an electrical fire. In March of this year an electrical fire forced the residents of the building to temporarily evacuate. Another fire occurred in October 2018, which left the building without air conditioning for a week.

Collins told the *Post* that many residents believe that the diocese is spending a minimal amount on repairs because they plan on selling the building for a profit. The building, which sits along the Intracoastal waterway, was first purchased in 2009 for \$3.3 million dollars, it is now valued at \$13.8 million.

The Episcopal Diocese and its leader Reverend Peter Eaton have declined to speak with the press.

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