Discomfort Inn

A subsidized AIDS housing crisis hits New York and the nation

February 1, 2007 By Tim Murphy

After giving $190 of her $640 monthly disability benefits to her Bronx AIDS housing facility and then covering her food bill, Lisa Turner, 41, lives on $10 a day. “It’s not comfortable,” she says. “I don’t even have my own home phone.” A New York City plan announced last October would require 2,200 of the city’s neediest positive people in subsidized housing to fork over all but $330 of their monthly income for rent, a rate long dictated by state law that 15,000 other government-housed HIV positive New Yorkers already follow. In Turner’s case, the hike would slash her daily budget to $3. Advocates immediately condemned the plan, ignoring city officials’ pleas that NYC has already spent more than $150 million to lower rent for the 2,200 in question and can no longer afford the extra subsidy. But days before the hike’s slated November 1 start date, advocates persuaded a federal judge to halt the increase, arguing that the state law actually violates a federal rule capping the cost of government-funded housing at one-third of tenants’ income. “The proposed policy is not only cruel—it’s illegal,” says Armen Merjian, an attorney for the New York Housing Works AIDS organization. At press time, the judge’s injunction was still in effect, and advocates told *POZ* they were chatting with staffers of newly elected New York Governor Eliot Spitzer to bring the state law in line with federal policy.

The NYC debacle occurs amid chronic underfunding of the federal Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS (HOPWA), which foots part of the rent for the New York PWAs. Advocates estimate that HOPWA is underfunded by more than $150 million, fueling a housing pinch in cities nationwide. In fact, NYC protects PWAs in need of housing help more than most cities, even legally requiring that no homeless positive person gets stuck in a shelter. Chicago’s congested shelter system, on the other hand, is packed with people with HIV. “There just aren’t enough funds for AIDS housing,” says Arturo Valdivia-Bendixen of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. Back in New York, Turner reports that she is grateful for the reprieve from the hike, adding, “Right now, I’m just surviving.”

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