Heartbreak Hotel

Shabby HIVer housing rouses an unlikely activist

October 1, 2004 By Jennifer Block

At six-foot-two and 200 pounds, former Army squad leader Amos Hough ain't exactly a pushover. Eighteen months ago, he checked into New York City's Malibu hotel, one of more than 100 facilities where the city's HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA) places homeless HIVers. Hough, 37, hardly expected beachfront luxury, but the blighted Malibu shocked him. Nowadays, it still may have roaches galore, but thanks to Hough, the Malibu has what no other HASA site does: a tenants' association. He's goaded his neighbors—mostly working folk like him who got sick and slipped through the cracks—into demanding humane conditions. "Listen," Hough commands at a recent tenants' meeting, "if we can get things changed at the Malibu, we can get things changed all over."

On any given night, HASA houses 3,600 of New York City's homeless PWAs. By law, the facilities are supposed to be "medically appropriate," but in June, a headline-grabbing City Council report found rampant violations: rat infestation, nonfunctioning bathrooms, blood- and feces-stained mattresses, exposed wire. "This investigation and previous reports suggest HASA is exercising little, if any, oversight to ensure that its housing meets basic standards," the report said. HASA deputy commissioner Elsie del Campo disagrees. "HASA audits facilities regularly," she told *POZ*, "and violations come up very infrequently."

At the Malibu tenants' meeting, however, members complain about curfews and unreasonable visiting hours (no guests after 5 p.m.), security guards demanding bribes and management retaliation against their organization. Thomasina McDonald, an older member with heart disease and a sharp tongue, mentions the five flights of stairs between the lobby and her room. Then, Hough rallies the group, passing around a letter to Malibu management. The letter requested a meeting about the guards and other issues, but was returned unopened. Reached by phone, Malibu's tenant manager Rose Elajouz refused to comment on house rules but denied security wrongdoing. "These are false accusations," she said. "This is the first I'm hearing about it." She also denied having seen the letter, calling *POZ*'s questions "harassment."

"There's no accountability," says Jennifer Flynn of New York City AIDS Housing Network (NYCAHN). Since 1997, New York City's Local Law 49 has granted homeless PWAs "emergency and transitional" housing. Yet after 30 days, tenants can't be evicted—and the average stay exceeds three months. Though glad for the law, AIDS advocates say taxpayer money would be better spent on permanent housing. First off, says Flynn, HASA should make formal, written contracts with hotel

owners. Meanwhile, landlords like the Malibu's Hank Fried make $2,000 a month per HASA tenant. Fried wouldn't return calls, but advocates estimate he nets $37 million per year—straight from NYC taxpayers. "For $2,000 a month they could be in luxury housing," says Flynn. "It makes no sense."

At press time, Hough and advocates were meeting with City Council, hoping to introduce legislation guaranteeing PWAs permanent housing within 60 days of entering a temporary site. "The slumlords are getting all this money," says Hough. "It's not right."

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