Homesick Blues

January 1, 2000 By Denny Lee

In his room at Chelsea's Allerton Hotel, which doubles as a New York City residence for homeless people with HIV, Zonell Wright never had a refrigerator for storing his perishable meds. But that was the least of it. If he killed one roach, Wright said, scores would emerge to consume the dead one. Mice burrowed into the urine-stained mattress, and crack vials littered the hallway. "The Allerton was disgusting and dangerous," said Wright, a 42-year-old African American. "My health would have been in jeopardy if I'd stayed." He moved to the Central Queens YMCA and, in late September, joined a class-action suit—filed on behalf of the city's homeless with HIV by the advocacy group Housing Works—charging the city with putting PWAs in conditions "unfit for human habitation."

The suit argues that the city, which places 2,000 HIVers a month in nearly 50 low-rent hotels, is violating a 1997 local law, as well as the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. It is the nation's first case to stake an ADA housing claim for PWAs, according to Armen Merjian, a senior staff attorney for Housing Works. If the argument succeeds—a preliminary hearing was scheduled for late 1999—Merjian said, the country's disabled "will be able to seize upon this case to demand a bare minimum of medically appropriate housing under the ADA." In fact, the National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that at some point in their lives nearly 50 percent of Americans with HIV are expected to need such housing assistance as supplemental income and rental subsidies.

To buttress its claims, Housing Works conducted a survey that found "appallingly filthy and unsanitary" rooms and bathrooms, lack of refrigerators in a third of the units, as well as loan sharking by hotel staff, drug dealing and prostitution. Two earlier reports reached similar conclusions, one of which was headed by the National Development and Research Institute, a nonpartisan outfit commissioned by New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Allerton staffers declined to be interviewed, but the Central Queens YMCA, where Wright now lives, disputed the suit's charges. "I treat this like my house," said Rachel Gordon, its senior residence director. She admitted, however, that this "house" does not provide refrigerators for meds. For now, Wright remains there but has said that situation could change "tomorrow."

Jason A. Turner, commissioner of the city's Human Resources Administration, which oversees the housing program, issued a statement saying that "these concerns have been taken seriously." But just two weeks after the suit was filed, his office announced that it was reducing the number of caseworkers, despite repeated charges that homeless PWAs rarely get to see them as required under city law.

In a related story, New York state’s highest court ruled unanimously in October that the Giuliani administration used its Eligibility Verification Review to create illegal obstacles for people with HIV seeking public assistance by requiring them to undergo repeated background checks.

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