

Written Testimony of Linne Gherdovich
House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Family Housing (DOD)
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My name is Linne Gherdovich, and like so many thousands of military spouses across the country, I have story to tell about having been harmed by a company allowed to mismanage housing on a military base. I am also the mother of six children ranging in ages from 1 to 13. But for all the ways my family has been mistreated at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, I hope you will listen to my story with two things in mind – my children, and especially my youngest son. I would like for you to see him as I do.

Rollin is 2. He was born with a condition that happens only once in every 400,000 births. Sadly, many of these babies are aborted. The complex is called Cloacal exstrophy syndrome, and essentially, he was born with organs – the bladder, intestines and reproductive organs – outside of his body. He has only one kidney, and he is diagnosed with spina bifida.

Rollin's young life has been a series of surgeries and medical procedures, and he has many, many more to come as doctors try to give him the life all children deserve. All that stated, he is a vibrant little fighter who brings our family incredible joy.

A multidisciplinary team of specialists, including five different surgeons, oversee Rollin's care at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Because his condition is so rare, I need to be prepared for questions about his history. It is essential that I be ready to answer their questions as completely and thoroughly as possible. I cannot allow blanks in his medical chart.

But there are blanks today because Hunt Military Communities hid from us the fact that our house was contaminated with mold. They ignored my multiple requests to test for the level and types of mold contamination and my final plea that they at least preserve the materials so that we could have the testing done ourselves fell on deaf ears.

My husband, James, is an Air Force colonel. We moved to Anacostia-Bolling in September so he could enroll in a senior executive development program at Fort McNair. It was our 14th move in 15 years.

We chose to live on base because we thought it would offer a safe, affordable place for our children, and because we knew we would be here for only 10 months. We didn't think we would be compromising the health of our family.

The house smelled horribly the day we walked in the door. Hunt blamed the smell on cat urine and had the carpet replaced. Only later did we learn that Hunt had never bothered to have the house approved for occupancy by base command as is required.

The new carpet brought little relief. Within days, all of my children developed respiratory symptoms. The younger ones – like Rollin – had hacking coughs and constant congestion. My nine-month-old baby, Ansel, came down with a fever that reached 104.5 degrees.

Three days after our move, we learned at a town hall meeting that Anacostia-Bolling houses have problems with mold, so we asked that ours be tested. Two Hunt managers came the next day to check potential spots for mold with a moisture meter, but they told us nothing was wrong – even though we could see the meter was finding high levels of moisture.

According to Hunt, our house was all fine, move-in ready and mold free. Hunt managers assured me the home was safe our children and our household goods could be delivered the following week.

After learning our house had not been approved for occupancy, the base commander and vice commander came to inspect, but they were forced out by the symptoms they experienced inside. The vice commander and another housing official said they could not be inside our house. She had to step outside. Her eyes were watery. She said I went outside to make sure it was just your house, but now I am back in here and I am dizzy. She said there is something bad inside your house.

James bought four HEPA air filtration devices to deal with the air. We took photos of ductwork that was filthy with thick dust. In one, Rollin is standing close by.

We just knew there was something going on with the house, but we did not know exactly what. Hunt was consistently saying there were no issues, so we took them at their word. We trusted that they validated the safety of the residences before we moved in, which they had not.

The installation command team has been with us, shoulder to shoulder, and they ordered that a third party perform an inspection. But the day before that could happen, Hunt hurried to have all ductwork, the HVAC and the furnace either cleaned or replaced. The company they hired – True North Consultants – performed their inspection after the ductwork had been cleaned, but the inspector did find moisture in a downstairs bathroom. He would tell us nothing more. He said we would have to go through Hunt.

In talking with him as he finished, he told us that his wife was pregnant with their first, so I put my baby, Ansel, in his arms and said, tell me: Is our home safe to sleep in tonight? I wanted it to be human to human, to make him tell me what was in his report. He would not. He said that we had to go through Hunt.

Instead of letting us know by phone when the results were in, Hunt allowed us to linger in a mold-infested home. Thirteen days after the inspection, Hunt told us our home would need to undergo renovation because of mold in two bathrooms, one of them we used routinely to bath Rollin.

Out of concern for Rollin, we asked Hunt again - before remediation got underway – that they professionally test for the type and extent of mold. Again, they refused.

After being told the remediation would take less than a week, we were put into temporary housing. We are a family of eight. The townhome they gave us had three bedrooms. There were three beds – total. Two of our children slept on a mattress on the floor for what turned about to be two months.

But by then my greatest concern was that we be able to test materials from the two bathrooms for the types of mold and level of contamination. I made that clear numerous times with at least three Hunt officials. In addition, I begged workers on the site to save materials from the bathroom so they could be tested. I begged them, please do not make me go through the trash.

Because I feared no one was listening, I emailed Hunt Maintenance Director Michael Knight at 8:30 a.m. Oct. 10. I explained that since there aren't many children with Rollin's condition, much of his medical care is still evolving. I need to be prepared to give his complete background when asked by the many different doctors and specialists we deal with. James also sent him an email that morning. We heard nothing until that evening.

Mr. Knight told us in an email that he had been busy and was sorry not to reply sooner. Unfortunately, he said, all the materials had been destroyed. If we were willing to pay \$200 ourselves, he would have materials tested from a third bathroom, but that was one where no moisture had been detected.

The testing Hunt had refused to do was now being offered to us only once the materials were disposed of, or in a location thought not be to a problem. In my opinion this was too convenient and contrived.

Further, despite the fact that the home was never approved for occupancy, Hunt tried on multiple occasions to insinuate the conditions were somehow our fault.

The day after being told materials with mold contamination had been destroyed, I sat in my car outside the house, guarding the house to make sure no more evidence of contamination materials could be destroyed while I called every inspector I could find online to ask if anyone could be sent right away.

The licensed inspector who did respond collected samples from whatever materials he could find, and those revealed that the house had extensive contamination from various types of mold – mainly stachybotrys and aspergillus penicillium.

According to the World Health Organization, those molds can produce mycotoxins that cause adverse health effects ranging from acute poisoning to longer-term harm, such as immune deficiency and cancer. That concerned me for the sake of my entire family. It worried me especially because of Rollin's compromised immune system.

Keep in mind, the inspector's samples were tests on whatever he could find remaining from the two bathrooms. They were not from the items that could give us the most complete understanding of the contamination. Those were disposed of with complete disregard for my son's condition.

Additionally, our inspector documented evidence that tiles containing asbestos were found in the bathroom and were cut by saw during the remediation, likely releasing cancerous asbestos fibers into the air. The materials in the bathroom also tested positive for asbestos. To top it off, the inspector informed us that Hunt's subcontractors had failed to establish adequate containment during the work.

Once Hunt acknowledged that asbestos fibers had been disturbed, they agreed to do air testing, but before doing that, covered our goods with plastic, rendering the tests invalid. Only when the many points of failure were brought to the attention of the Hunt maintenance director did he offer to replace the items.

With everything remaining in the home at risk of being contaminated by asbestos – toys, photo albums, furniture and schoolbooks I use to homeschool my children – we were advised by the inspector and the base environmental engineer to not take the risk.

An appraiser Hunt hired put the value of the possessions we had to leave behind at more than \$60,000. Hunt first offered us \$5,000 for our property. Hunt later offered to pay about \$15,000. Their latest offer, which they stated was “final,” was a little more than \$33,000. They also refused to pay for the \$2,700 we had to cover tests they would not do and refused to pay fair market our moving costs.

Our position with Hunt in the beginning, was that we’re fine dealing with the inconveniences of remediation and being kicked out – we can roll with it. I’m angry that we have mold – that they moved us into a house with mold – but what I really care about is just knowing what my son was exposed to because he reacted to it. Now we will never know.

James worries also that if we have been treated this way, how are they treating the young airmen. This is a crisis for our service, he says, and by extension the fundamental security of all families on installations.

Is this really the type of sacrifice our nation expects of us?