

HEARING BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY  
CONSTRUCTION, VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND  
RELATED AGENCIES

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Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, Ranking Member Carter and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

The Armed Forces Housing Advocates (AFHA) is proud to be here to represent military families living in privatized military housing across the nation, but we are also extremely dispirited that an organization such as ours is necessary to exist.

My name is Rachel Christian and I am co-founder of the Armed Forces Housing Advocates, along with Sarah Kline, Kate Needham and Noelle Pacl. AFHA is a grassroots non-profit organization that educates and empowers military residents to ensure their safety and health in their privatized military homes. We believe readiness starts with a safe home and our mission will not be complete until we are certain our servicemembers and their families have the access and ability to live in appropriate housing.

It has been over three years since Congress began taking a closer look at the MHPI program, but most military families are still in the same, if not worse situation. The Tenants Bill of Rights was to be a source of hope. Instead, it was implemented haphazardly with those responsible for protecting military families being provided little or no training.

Just this year, we have seen environmental hazards, faulty construction, fire hazards, toxic gas exposures and improper maintenance that have put the lives, health and safety of our military families at risk. Even more egregious are the documented disability violations that continue to occur. These instances are not unique to one installation, military service branch, or MHPI property management company, but rather so common that many military families just deem them part of the military life. Poor housing conditions are becoming expected, rather than being a rare exception.

The DoD and the MHPI property management companies must be held accountable for allowing our servicemembers and their families to reside in substandard living conditions. The lack of oversight at military installations continues to create an environment where service members are afraid of retaliation for requesting a habitable home. How can we expect our service members to fight for our country when there is no one fighting to keep them safe in their own homes?

As an example, and for your reference, I would like to address some situations that can be seen today in military housing across the country regardless of which branch or privatized housing partner is responsible:

Military families are being rented homes filled with environmental hazards. The housing partners are performing renovations without proper containment, all while families are still in the home, subjecting them to the toxins in the air. Some are being charged for damages caused by the housing partners' own contractors. Corporal Zacharias from Marine Corps Base Hawaii submitted work orders for a leak prior to taking leave and returned to extensive mold, which caused thousands of dollars in damages. The maintenance record in the electronic work order system showed maintenance visiting the property multiple times and that the leak had been fixed. A neighbor's doorbell camera showed no maintenance staff ever entered the property. Corporal Zacharias requested displacement due to having no use of his bathroom and the contractor remediating the property stating it was uninhabitable. Proper containment was not used and Corporal Zacharias had to source housing himself due to the refusal by the property management company to provide proper accommodations. He is still fighting the move-out charges for this incident.

Maintenance staff are performing work such as electrical, plumbing and remediation of environmental hazards without training or proper certifications. At Fort Drum, a family experienced a natural gas leak in their home for 6-months. The family repeatedly called the maintenance staff and the fire department, but no one was willing to properly mediate the leak until the resident purchased their own detector to prove that a leak was occurring. When the director of maintenance was asked about his teams' qualifications at the site, he replied they had none and that none were required.

Many reasonable accommodations for families with disabilities are being denied or ignored. The housing partner often request unreasonable amounts of information and puts layers of red tape in place for even the most minor requests. A simple request for approval for an Emotional Support Animal for a resident with PTSD, in which the resident supplied a note from their physician was only approved on condition. The condition being approval from the government housing office to align with an Air Force regulation. When the community manager was questioned on why this was needed, she insisted that it came for the corporate legal team. The government housing office had never heard of such an approval. It was simply red tape that made an already struggling family more distressed.

Requests for window fall prevention devices are being denied or families are being charged extraordinary amounts for window guard installations and removals. Evan's Law, a law passed in memory of Evan English, a four-year old that fell to his death in military housing in Hawaii, was put in place to protect other military children. But since the bill's passage, in just four years, one single neighborhood at Naval Base San Diego had seven children fall from windows and received lifelong traumatic brain injuries.

Sewage leaks are a common occurrence in military housing. Housing partners will refuse to replace carpets that have been soaked in raw sewage and will pump the sewage into yards where children play. At Fort Bragg, when a family questioned the safety of this practice, the housing partner simply moved the family into a new home and without remediation, moved a new family into the biohazard.

Faulty construction is leading to the development of leaks, fire hazards, roof collapse, among other risks in the home. The Apodaca family, while stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, had their kitchen cabinets fall, while Mrs. Apodaca was reaching for a glass. The cabinet was anchored incorrectly, as noted by the housing partners maintenance staff. The incident caused a traumatic brain injury that has impacted Mrs. Apodaca's life drastically. The housing partner is using a claims service provider for the incident and has for over a year refused to give any update to the family, even with the involvement of corporate leadership.

These examples are not unique and are only a small portion of the problems. Habitability concerns are still continuing. Time and money are being expended and a continued homelife uncertainty remains.

Under the Tenants Bill of Rights, an electronic work order system was implemented to document the maintenance history of any given property. Upon investigation it is clear that there are mass discrepancies between the work orders recorded in the electronic system and the actual work orders placed by residents.

In order to remedy the current situation, proposed H.R. 7144 would give residents a way to report their issues without retaliation and provide Congress a centralized portal for oversight. Accordingly, lawmakers, including those on this Subcommittee, would be able to see, in real time, challenges that service members and families are experiencing across the spectrum of MHPI housing.

The Tenants Bill of Rights has also provided Dispute Resolution to some military housing tenants. However, most families are being turned away and denied access to the dispute process for arbitrary reasons. The discretionary fashion of this so-called "right" just leads to more frustration and families believing they have no recourse.

Rights are not actually rights if families cannot access or utilize them.

Readiness starts with a safe home.

We are not ready.