

# ***My Apartment Shouldn't Make Me Sick*** **Campaigning for Healthy Housing and Racial Justice in New York City**

## **Northwest Federation of Community Organizations**

Teresa García's son misses school once a week, due to mold and mildew in the family's Brooklyn apartment, triggering his asthma attacks. Meanwhile, water leaks in his bedroom have driven him to sleeping on the living room floor.

This story illustrates the intersection between housing and health – and the city's failure to ensure healthy housing for all residents, including immigrants of color in Brooklyn's Sunset Park neighborhood. The Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC) is running a campaign to win citywide policy to fix living conditions that compromise the health of people of color. This effort unites concern for environmental justice, racial equity, and health.

### **Identifying the problem and taking action against slumlords.**

Sunset Park is home to growing communities of color. Along Fifth Avenue, in the shadow of gentrification, immigrants from Latin America live in crowded, substandard apartments. FAC had already built a base among the neighborhood's residents, focusing on immigrant and workplace justice. But

the organization was seeing more and more cases in which families were being sickened by their homes, and they decided they needed to do something about it.

The organization began by targeting landlords. Through assistance in housing court and direct action, FAC helped over 250 families address housing-related health issues in 74 buildings. In all, FAC took 55 landlords to court, used direct action and public education

### ***Profile of a leader: Elizabeth Mendoza***

By the time Elizabeth found out about the Fifth Avenue Committee through her church, she was angry and ready for change. For three years, she had been trying to get repairs in her apartment, which was exacerbating her daughter's asthma. With FAC help, she won changes in her apartment, but she continued to be concerned about the other tenants, who were too fearful to come forward. She worked with FAC to enter the building in a city program, through which it received a building-wide inspection – which resulted in a lead abatement for the whole building.

Based on this experience, she became an active leader in FAC's Health and Housing Committee, participating in the committee's inaugural meeting. She's been at the forefront throughout and spoke at the press conference to unveil FAC's citywide healthy housing proposal.

A native of Puebla, Mexico, Elizabeth also makes arts and crafts for quinceañeras and informally organizes parties. Now enrolled in a writing class, she continues to develop new skills that help her make sure her community has a seat at the policy-making table.

to raise awareness in the most egregious cases, and won comprehensive clean-up of 34 buildings. The results will improve health and housing conditions for over 400 families.

FAC built a leadership team and brought them into the fight using direct action and other innovative tactics. One tactic involved obtaining prescriptions from doctors documenting and attesting the medical need for repairs. Having a doctor condemn substandard housing as a dire health issue dramatically boosted FAC's credibility and underscored the urgency of their demands.

Through these campaigns, FAC leaders got fired up for a bigger fight. They got a taste of victory, saw the need for a broader solution, and had a chance to be leaders. As a result, the wins helped lay the foundation for a broader campaign that would go beyond pressuring individual landlords and pushing for system-wide reform.

**Expanding the campaign, expanding the base.** Residents already knew their housing was in bad shape. They all battled with infestations, poor heating systems, leaky pipes and walls, and structural defects, like ceilings that had caved in. However, they didn't always associate these conditions with health problems such as asthma and allergies. So, to kick off a broader healthy housing campaign, FAC knew they needed to educate the people in their own neighborhood and expand their base around this issue.

In 2006, FAC launched an outreach drive, contacting 250 families. The organization also developed a survey for documenting the problem. The findings were shocking—but not surprising. Over half of respondents reported roach infestation, nearly a third had leaky ceilings, and one quarter went without heat and hot water in the winter. But, out of fear and frustration with the housing court system, a quarter of those reporting needed repairs weren't asking for them.

These results – which mirrored citywide results presented by the Department of Health – were compiled into a report. Developing such a stark picture of the problem wasn't the only outcome of the documentation effort. The interview process also yielded deeper interaction with affected neighbors and added new members to the leadership team.

In advancing the campaign, FAC developed a two-pronged approach: building strategic alliances, on one hand, and creating a broader coalition to move legislative changes, on the other.

**Building key alliances.** For more political muscle, FAC turned to Lutheran Medical Center. The medical center is a powerful player in the city, treats many of FAC's members, and could be the authoritative, neutral face of a campaign to establish needed health standards and enforcement policies when it comes to housing.

The organization wanted a few commitments from Lutheran. First, they wanted the medical center to provide “housing prescriptions” in a more systematic way. (Specifically, they wanted doctors to complete medical affidavits regarding the negative impact of housing conditions on patients' health. These medical affidavits – or “housing

prescriptions” – could then be used in litigation to pressure courts to recognize the intersection of housing and health and the medical need for better housing conditions.) Second, they wanted the medical center to come out in support of housing code reform and join the organization in its effort to develop a broader response to the problem.

In the fall of 2006, FAC presented its report to Lutheran and saw that developing a partnership would require building trust, negotiating the relationship over time, and continued pressure. Initially, the medical center was reluctant to collaborate, expressing discomfort with the direct action tactics FAC had used in its campaigns, and suggesting landlord education instead.

To raise Lutheran’s comfort level, FAC held a roundtable with the medical center’s chronic disease management team. At the event, grassroots leaders spoke from their own experience, while housing attorneys, brought by FAC, discussed challenges in working with landlords. Ultimately, Lutheran agreed to coordinate its outreach with FAC, whose organizers would go out with the medical center’s asthma nurses. FAC sees this as the first step in developing a stronger partnership, as well as a way of continuing to expand and target its base.

**Working with coalitions, challenges in the legislative process.** While pursuing collaboration with the medical center, FAC also created the Coalition for Asthma-Free Homes, bringing together 10 organizations with an interest in housing and health. These included the Urban Justice Center, American Lung Association, New York Immigration Coalition, the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, and Make the Road by Walking. The coalition members agreed that addressing housing-related asthma hazards required citywide legislation, including inspection of every home at least once a year, with an improved enforcement timeline.

At the same time, a larger housing coalition, Communities for Housing Equity, was working on legislation, too. Their Healthy Homes Act included the asthma coalition’s fixes as part of broader reform, so FAC and their partners – all also members of Communities for Housing Equity – worked to support the Healthy Homes Act.

Through the legislative process, an alternative bill, the Safe Housing Act, emerged. It would target the 200 worst slumlords in the city each year, and represents a stepping stone in the effort to improve housing code enforcement. This bill passed and the city began enforcing it in 2007.

Similarly, a language access in housing bill, also supported by Communities for Housing Equity, was also introduced in the city council. This bill would improve the availability of interpretation and translation in the housing code enforcement system. The Committee on Housing and Buildings held a hearing on this bill in 2008.

**Moving the campaign forward.** FAC continued to work to secure introduction of their proposal and a city council hearing on asthma and housing. The proposal is twofold. First, it will reclassify the most prevalent asthma triggers – mold and pest infestations –

as immediate health hazards. Second, it will create enforceable guidelines for the prompt removal of asthma triggers.

The organization laid the foundation for this drive in a number of ways. In May 2007, asthma month, they secured a sponsor, Councilwoman Rosie Méndez, for their bill. They also developed a base in two additional boroughs, building legislative relationships, and exploring an alliance with the Department of Health.

In June 2007, FAC unveiled its proposal in a press conference that attracted English-language television and Spanish-language radio and television. With Elizabeth Mendoza as the organization's spokesperson, FAC leaders gathered at a building in the Lower East Side, standing side-by-side with the president of that building's tenant association. (The president also has two daughters with asthma.) Councilwoman Méndez announced the introduction of the legislation. FAC's foundation work has paid off – they have signed up 20 sponsors for the bill. Their goal is to have 26 sponsors signed on before a Committee hearing this year.

**Changing Policy through the Administrative Process.** FAC identified a policy change that the City Board of Health could make without legislative action by the City Council – revising the Health Code to use integrated pest management instead of pesticides for pest control. The pesticides that are currently used to eliminate rodents and other pests aggravate asthma, and FAC has been urging the city to use the holistic methods of integrated pest management instead. This fall the Board initiated an administrative process to amend the Code to “focus on pest management incorporates a hierarchy of actions to prevent and eliminate pests, including structural alterations and repairs, and the elimination of conditions conducive to pest infestations” and eliminate portions of the code regarding pesticides. They held a public hearing in October to allow public comment on the measure and are completing the administrative rule change process.

### ***Lessons learned***

***Framing the problem as a citywide issue is important.*** Building a base locally is key, but the solution to the problem is wider than a single neighborhood. FAC's leaders saw this when they won victories against individual landlords but realized that the problem extended to other buildings, neighborhoods, and boroughs. They approached a city council member who represents not Sunset Park but a district in lower Manhattan – and now she is championing FAC's proposal.

***Ultimately, proposed solutions need to arise from a familiarity with affected communities and from a racial justice analysis.*** Due to structural racism, those most affected by a problem like unhealthy housing conditions are also the least likely to complain. Immigrants often live in overcrowded conditions and don't want to get trouble with landlords or the authorities. Raising the standards landlords must meet is important, but in the end the solution lies in removing the burden of enforcement from tenants and establishing preemptive enforcement by city agencies.

***Building an understanding of the racial dimensions of an issue take a long time – but it's worth the effort.*** Even allies on an issue or campaign may not be in a position where they can talk about the racial dimensions of the issue. If we want the public and our allies to think about health issues in terms of racial disparities, we need to invest in developing a language for explaining the racial dimensions of those issues and continue the dialogue.

***How NWFCO made this organizing possible***

- Drafted a report describing the findings of FAC's research and recommendations.
- Provided campaign strategy support.
- Providing ongoing consultation on campaign implementation.