

YVONNE ABRAHAM

An unstable living situation

By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST OCTOBER 10, 2013

What does a 91-year-old woman in a tumbledown home in Brighton have in common with a wealthy, ethically iffy congressman from Harlem?

They share a landlord, amazingly enough, and what a piece of work that landlord is. But that, sadly, is where their stories diverge.

It's not much to look at, but Mary Eisenhart's apartment is home. After her husband died two decades ago, Eisenhart moved to this building, called Warren Hall, in the center of the neighborhood where she raised her six children.

Her place is tiny and cramped, with stained carpets. A plumbing catastrophe a couple years ago did her bathroom some serious damage. "I had to go to the bathroom holding an umbrella, if you can imagine that," she laughed.

Last week, another leak sent water gushing through the ceiling. A pathetic piece of plywood, nailed up after the last downpour, hangs from the bulging, discolored plaster. "It's so loose up there," she said, poking the soft ceiling with her cane, "I'm afraid the whole thing is going to go."

Eisenhart and her fellow tenants are worried they'll have to go, too. For 40 years, Warren Hall, like many buildings in once low-rent neighborhoods all over the country, was designated as affordable. In return for cheap mortgages and federal rent subsidies, owners agreed to rent to poorer residents. Now the contracts are expiring, and some landlords are converting affordable housing into market rate units. In a city of ridiculous rents, that is a disaster.

Recognizing a crisis, state and local officials enacted a law making it harder for landlords to boot tenants quickly, and encouraging them to sell to owners who will keep properties affordable. Everybody at Warren Hall hoped this would happen for them. A local company, Schochet Companies, has offered to pay close to market rate for Warren Hall, to fix its many problems, and maintain its 33 apartments for poor, elderly, and disabled residents.

But the building's current owner, a New York-based real estate giant called The Olnick Organization, seems unwilling to close the deal. The two companies came close in May, but Olnick pulled back. It is now demanding that Schochet buy the building, which also houses a dry cleaner, without an environmental inspection.

Who would take that lousy deal?

Meanwhile, Warren Hall continues to deteriorate. It's almost as if Olnick is waiting the tenants out, allowing their homes to become so unlivable that they will clamor to leave. The company declined to comment.

If only Eisenhart had more pull. If only she was as powerful as, say, Charlie Rangel, the New York congressman. Olnick seems happy to accommodate him. A few years ago, it emerged that Rangel had been enjoying four rent-stabilized apartments in an Olnick building, paying half the market rate for three apartments he combined into a palatial home, and a fourth, which he used as a campaign office — illegally, according to The New York Times. Rangel was censured by his colleagues for this ethics breach, among others. And as this favored tenant lived in bargain luxury, Olnick booted others from rent-stabilized apartments, some on spurious grounds.

Sadly, Olnick's receptiveness to politicians seems confined to those from New York. Mayor Tom Menino and Senator Elizabeth Warren have written letters urging the company to close with Schochet, or another developer willing to keep Warren Hall affordable. All, so far, to no avail.

So Eisenhart and the others wait, and fret. "I've got everything around me that I like," she said. "How many years have I got left? I just want to stay here until I go."

This is a story we know well — the landlord and the luckless tenant. And we know the usual ending even better. But a happy conclusion is so close here. All it requires is a little decency.