

Four mothers fighting ouster from Gadsden Green state their case

By Schuyler Kropf
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Charleston City Councilman Wendell Gilliard (right) spoke on behalf of the women whose families face possible eviction; one of his comments brought a sharp retort from Housing Authority attorney Don Clark (left).

Four single mothers facing eviction from Charleston's Gadsden Green public housing because of their children's armed robbery charges did their best Tuesday to argue why they should be allowed to stay.

"Our kids made a mistake," a tearful Rushika Robertson said after an eviction hearing at the city's Housing Authority headquarters. "I don't condone anything my son did."

A fifth woman, whose son was accused, said her family also is at risk.

If the women lose their fight, they and as many as 25 of their children could find themselves out on the street in the largest eviction of its kind in recent city memory. Hearing officer Ramona Gourdine has up to 10 days to render a decision, attorneys said.

At issue are federal Housing and Urban Development regulations that say tenants can be evicted if anyone connected to a public apartment engages in criminal activity.

The juveniles, aged 14-16, were arrested in October for allegedly confronting two people in separate incidents near the College of Charleston.

One of the victims was shot in the hand with a pellet gun. Six youths on bicycles were involved, police said.

Tuesday's hearing came as an attorney for the women argued that a blanket eviction would

represent the extreme. John F. "Skip" Martin said it would be wrong to punish others, including infants, for acts that none of the women condoned.

"The sole reason why they are being evicted is due to the fact that they have the apparent misfortune of being related by blood to teenage boys accused of committing a crime," Martin said in a statement given to the hearing officer.

Martin also pointed out that the youths have not been convicted of the charges.

And the threat to the community has been mitigated already, Martin said, because the mothers have made other living arrangements for the youths, including staying with relatives away from Gadsden Green.

Gadsden Green is a complex of apartment buildings that houses 262 families near the Crosstown Expressway between Hagood and President streets. The Housing Authority contends that serious criminal charges against any individual allow the authority to evict the entire family for the good of their neighbors. Tenants sign a lease that includes a zero-tolerance policy for serious or repeat offenses.

The policy and ones similar to it have been controversial in Charleston and elsewhere. In 2002 the U.S. Supreme Court reinforced a hard line against drugs, backing rules that permit eviction of families from federally subsidized housing if any family member or guest is involved in narcotics.

At the hearing, Charleston City Councilman Wendell Gilliard, himself a product of public housing, spoke on behalf of the women, saying the city was being short-sighted.

"We just added to the statistics of the homeless," he said of the eviction attempts.

Gilliard's presence also contributed to some tension at the hearing when he rekindled allegations from an audit this summer that showed sloppy oversight of Housing Authority credit cards. He said he was at the hearing to speak the "truth" about the authority.

Gilliard's comment drew a quick rebuke from Housing Authority attorney Don Clark. "You wouldn't know the truth if it hit you in the face," he said.

Even if a hearing officer decides against the families, they still could appeal the case to a county magistrate before anyone is evicted, officials said earlier.

Housing Authority Director Don Cameron said the authority might evict "tens" of families over the course of a year, mostly for failure to pay rent.

The rules on tenant behavior are clear, he added. "It's incorporated in our leases, that we can't have anti-social behavior," he said, and that "if someone is arrested for drugs, or rape, or in this instance, armed robbery, we don't wait for them to be convicted."

Cameron called this situation highly unusual, and said that he can't think of a time when four or five families were evicted because of one criminal incident. "Usually it's one person involved in an incident," he said.

About 1,400 families are on the waiting list for subsidized family apartments, he said.

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