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## **Cedar Rapids' most neglected rental properties are all in same area**

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CEDAR RAPIDS -- Ella Doss used her upstairs bathtub for many things.

When she wanted hot water in the kitchen, where the faucet had none, she filled a bucket in the tub and carried it downstairs. When she wanted to flush the toilet, she filled a bucket in the tub and dumped water into the stool.

Bad plumbing is one problem at 1423 Bever Ave. SE, where Doss lived for two years. Faulty wiring is another.

"If I have the TV on in the living room and I try to turn on the microwave, the fuse blows," Doss said.

Last week, Doss moved out. Cedar Rapids Bank & Trust took possession of the house after foreclosing on Robert Wibholm, its former owner. The bank decided the property isn't worth fixing and wants to sell it. It is now vacant but for the cats that peer from an upstairs window.

The Cedar Rapids Code Enforcement Division doesn't keep a list of which rental homes in Cedar Rapids are cited for the most code violations. But police, landlords and neighborhood leaders say a handful of the most neglected rental properties are clustered in the half-block from Doss' former home to Third Avenue SE, just off an intersection bracketed by Westminster Presbyterian and St. Paul's United Methodist churches.

The entire block is suffering. Eleven of 24 homes in the 1400 block of Bever Avenue SE are vacant. Some are full of cats. A vacant lot across from the Bever Apartments is cut in half by a dirt path, the unofficial pedestrian thoroughfare to the Cigarette Outlet, Road Ranger and Hy-Vee Food Store on First Avenue East. Trash litters the street and sidewalks. Most homes on the

block are assessed at less than \$60,000 -- doubtless more than they could command on the market.

For Terry Bilsland, president of the Wellington Heights Neighborhood Association, the block is an aching wound.

"People go home from work, and they see that, and they think that's what Wellington Heights is like, and it gives us a bad name," Bilsland said. "There's nobody going to invest any money in that area until something's done with the worst properties."

Cedar Rapids has begun to pressure landlords of such problem properties like never before. The city is using its nuisance abatement ordinance, which allows the city to declare a property a nuisance based on crime, noise, trash or building code violations. It is a strategy that has been successful in Davenport.

Once a property has been classified as a nuisance, police can charge a landlord for the time officers spend there. If the landlord doesn't ensure the health and safety of the house, building officials can order it vacated or even recommend it be demolished.

Lt. Chuck Mincks, the police commander for southeast Cedar Rapids, said the nuisance abatement law is helping force landlords to make changes.

"When you're talking about hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars worth of law enforcement time being charged against you, that usually makes people perk up and listen because nobody wants to get hit in the pocketbook," he said.

Nuisance abatement hearings have resulted in 17 demolition orders for non-flood properties since the end of July. Most of those were dilapidated vacant properties, said John Riggs, an assistant building official at the city's Code Enforcement Division.

Landlords will increasingly feel the pressure.

"We're going for the easy pickings now, to set a precedent," Riggs said.

### **Center of neighborhood**

One of the first landlords to get the city's attention was Keith Nemecek, the

owner of the Bever Apartments at 1415 Bever Ave. SE, just next door to Doss' old home.

The apartments make up one corner of an infamous triangle of rental properties that also included the Rose Apartments and the home at 1410 Bever Ave. SE.

"We kind of called that our trifecta there last winter," Mincks said.

In 2007, Nemecek, who lives near Winthrop, borrowed \$170,000 and bought the Bever Apartments and three other properties from Wibholm, who had a small southeast Cedar Rapids real estate empire before he was sent to federal prison in September on gun and drug convictions.

Officials cited the Bever Apartments for 42 code violations at its last inspection. Many of those were minor, but landlords have 30 days to prepare for an inspection, and inspectors still found combustible items in mechanical closets, open electrical panels and an unsealed sewer opening.

In August, Nemecek ran afoul of the police. Dispatchers had logged 180 police calls and 83 hours at his property in eight months for such crimes as assault, domestic disturbance, theft and robbery. Mincks told Nemecek he needed to hire a property manager to watch the parking lot, where people were congregating under the balcony day and night.

Nemecek fixed the problems enough to get Mincks off his back, but contends that in the long term, the neighborhood is irredeemable. Tenants rip his property apart, he said, but get a free pass from inspectors and in small claims court. Police, he added, are by turns overzealous and indifferent, judges get in the way of evictions and there is no way to attract decent tenants.

"Will you live down there? You want to move in there today?" he asked.  
"Ain't nobody that I would want that would live there."

He bought the property, he said, against his better judgment because the deal with the desperate Wibholm was too good to pass up. He said the building will have paid for itself within five years, and, when the economy improves, he may be able to sell it for \$250,000.

**Rest of the block**

Next to Bever Apartments is 1409 Bever Ave. SE, a house that has been converted into three apartments. Its owner is Timothy Terry, founder and partner at Terry, Lockridge & Dunn, an accounting and financial consulting firm with offices in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. Terry owns many properties in Cedar Rapids; he could not be reached for comment.

Police visited the property 36 times last year, and the yard on one October day was covered with trash.

Inside, four adults were sleeping in a two-room apartment with three dogs, three cats and an army of cockroaches rattling over the kitchen sink. The stench of animal feces hung in the air. An extension cord snaked across the kitchen floor, connecting the refrigerator to a wall outlet in the living room.

Elizabeth Fisher pays about \$500 per month, including utilities, for the place. "I'm on a lease until December," she said.

The basement is locked. The badly stained bathroom ceiling is in danger of collapsing. Fisher blames a woman who lives next door for the trash and the bugs.

"I can't afford any other place than this," she said.

Across the street is 1410 Bever Ave. SE, a single-family rental in the shadow of the Rose Apartments. It was closed after police were called there 71 times last year and inspectors found a cockroach infestation, garbage everywhere, several broken windows, a bed in the cellar, the kitchen ceiling falling and no fire extinguishers or smoke detectors. Kevin Bachus of Solon owns the property and could not be reached for comment.

Steve DeMeulenaere owns the Rose Apartments, which attracted police officers 121 times last year. This March, inspectors found 77 code violations there, mostly outlets either broken or missing covers, empty fire extinguishers, a curtain hanging on a radiator, cockroaches and missing or broken smoke detectors.

### **Sticking it out**

Spring Jackson has rented a home on the block for three years and runs a day-

care business.

"If they just ripped those two buildings down, we'd be OK," she said of the Rose and Bever Apartments. "It's just a revolving circle of keeping this corner full of drug activity."

Jackson rejects Nemecek's contention that the neighborhood is a lost cause. She stood in a living room full of toys and books, with Winnie the Pooh artwork on the walls.

Landlords could renovate their properties and start screening tenants more carefully -- if they wanted to, she said.

"It would take a little work, it would take a little time," she said. "But they don't want to sacrifice having apartments open and not receiving money."

Doris Courtright and her family will stick it out. She has lived in a house across the street from the Bever Apartments for 15 years, next to the vacant lot that has become a public walkway. Someone broke her front window a few weeks ago after her husband took a picture at night from the front porch.

She wishes the neighborhood were more like some of her friends' neighborhoods. She doesn't know her neighbors, doesn't really care to and feels no sense of community. It hasn't always been this way. But because she knows she can't sell her home for what it is worth and because she doesn't want to admit defeat, she and her family will stay.

"It's not the safest neighborhood, but I'm not leaving," Courtright said. "If people move that have owned their houses for 15 years, then it feels like they're winning."