The James Weldon Johnson housing development on 112th Street in Manhattan may not be the best place to live in the city, but as part of the city's public housing system - the largest in the nation - it is among the more affordable. The development will have a new recreation center in coming months to make it nicer.

Ethel Velez lives in one of the development's 1,307 apartments, and as president of the development's tenant's association and director of a citywide alliance of public housing residents knows more about public housing problems than most people.

Security is the most pressing issue, she said; maintenance is another. The federal government could help out with either one, but instead Congress is making things worse, she said. Many advocates, New York City politicians and tenants agree.

In 2004, public housing may be the most important front in the battle to protect affordable housing in New York City. A new community service requirement for residents of public housing is a reflection of an intense anti-public housing sentiment in Congress, advocates said. They expect any new policy ideas from Washington to be worse.

Thousands of people will face eviction now that the new rule - requiring eight hours of community service a month - has gone into effect January 1, 2004. And thousands of other people will be fighting the rule, which has already become a rallying cry among advocates, elected representatives and tenants.

Many advocates believe that the new rule is yet another indication of a disturbing change in the role the federal government plays in housing - and one that is exacerbating homelessness as a record number of New Yorkers are crowding city shelters.

"Why should public housing residents have to do this at all?" said Judith Goldiner of the Legal Aid Society, which represents many New York City Housing Authority tenants in Housing Court. If the requirement is in return for receiving subsidized housing, she said, "then why not the farmers who get subsidies? Why not the people who get a tax deduction? Why is it poor people? It makes no sense."

A 1998 law, the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act, included the community service requirement. But some members of Congress, led by New York Rep. Charles Rangel, prevented it going into effect by blocking its funding. But this year, the law has gone into effect.

Emile Milne, Rangel's press secretary, said the community service requirement was reflective of more than just a hostile attitude in Congress toward public housing.

"I think there's an overarching hostility attitude toward poor people overall," he said. "The attitude is about getting as many benefits to wealthy people at the expense of poor people. You can see that by just looking at the tax bills. It's a pattern."

Many of the estimated 500,000 public housing residents in New York City will be exempt from the new requirement. Tenants older than 62 and younger than 18 will not have to meet the community service requirement, nor will pregnant women with doctors' notes, the disabled, people receiving Social Security Insurance or welfare, or people working more than 30 hours a week.

But as many as 60,000 people will have to prove that they have worked eight hours as volunteers for non-profit organizations, tenant associations or other agencies that take volunteers.

The housing authority has sent notice to tenants and is currently establishing procedures to enforce the requirement, said Howard Marder, the agency's public information officer. The new policy is not popular at the agency, he said, although he added that the agency had increased the number of exemptions from five to 20 and most people would not be affected.

"Anytime you have an unfunded mandate, it puts a burden on us," Marder said. "We'll have to take people away from other work" to enforce the new rule.

The Legal Aid Society is already preparing to file suit in court because the authority is not

exempting people who should be exempted, Goldiner said.

Calling it outrageous, City Councilmember Charles Barron of Brooklyn said he would soon introduce a resolution against the rule.

"People are already living under challenging conditions in public housing," Barron said. "To now enforce an eight hour rule is an attempt to get some cheap slave labor. This will add to homelessness.

"As long as people meet the requirements (for public housing), there shouldn't be a free labor requirement," he continued. "This is setting up a catastrophe, a condition where you're going to create homelessness. It makes no sense whatsoever. It's almost genocidal."

Tenant leaders like Velez adamantly oppose the rule and are preparing to fight it.

"Slavery's back," she said. "When folks are financially strapped, it shouldn't be something that's held against them."

"When I think of public service, the language itself is insulting," she said. "Mandatory volunteer community service? It's demoralizing. And at the end is eviction if you don't do it. So then you make someone homeless."

Many public housing residents already volunteer, Velez said, patrolling their complexes and cleaning public areas. "I think it's insulting that now you'll have to get a thing signed when you've already been doing this of your own free will."

The only positive side to the new rule may be its usefulness in organizing tenants, she said in the James Weldon Johnson's tenant's association office recently, its walls covered with pro-public housing literature, announcements and calls for action.

"We might turn this whole thing around and use it while it's on the books," she said. "Until we can fight it off and get it eliminated, then let's use it as a positive."

Joe Lamport is the assistant director of the City-Wide Task Force on Housing Court , a coalition of community housing organizations.