by Brenda Tavakoli
Wednesday, July 25, 2007 12:00 AM

Unbeknownst to many residents, the basement of the building at 312 Manhattan Avenue in West Harlem was the site of cockfights and a marijuana lab, complete with a secret growing room with dozens of plants. Amid rumors, confusion and innuendo, residents finally learned of the goings on from each other and from the media. Ultimately the building's superintendent at the time, who allegedly had been connected to the illegal activities, lost his job.

The people who lived at 312 Manhattan Avenue could have acted earlier to curb the fights and drug use. At the next tenants' association meeting, community affairs officer Victor PeĂ±a of the 28th police precinct told the residents of how they can work for improved safety in the buildings.

A variety of programs exist to help New Yorkers keep their apartment buildings safe. Such programs are not, of course, exclusive to Harlem, or only to buildings or neighborhoods with particular kinds of problems. They are available to buildings throughout the five boroughs, to condominiums and co-ops as well as rental buildings, and are in place in all 343 New York City Housing Authority developments. While buildings that have been the site of illegal activity get preference for the programs, other buildings can get help as well.

But like the residents of 312 Manhattan Avenue, many tenants are not aware of the assistance or do not know how to get access to it. There is no centralized place for New Yorkers to get this kind of information. And many buildings do not have enough residents who are willing to put in the time and effort to make things happen. It takes an incredible amount of energy and persistence to clean up some buildings, but, according to observers who have seen buildings once written off, even by their residents, turn around, the effort can certainly pay off. Civil libertarians, though, stress that these anti crime campaigns can infringe on residents' rights and lead to false arrests â€“ and worse.

Changing a Building

The Manhattan Avenue affair is relatively mild when compared to other area buildings that Officer PeĂ±a has seen turn around.

"One particular building that comes to mind," PeĂ±a says, was on West 123 Street. It had only four tenants in a building with 40 apartments. And PeĂ±a recalls, "Two of those tenants were legal tenants. The other two were not." The building was infested not only with rodents, but with

crack dens, heroin and prostitution. There were several cases of people dying from overdoses in the building, and the garbage piles in the back of the building, PeĂ±a says, were “five or six feet deep.” The owner had been given several warnings to clean up the building but didn’t comply.

In early 2006, a man fell off the roof to his death while trying to get into one of the apartments. This incident and the subsequent investigation allowed the police to put together a MARCH operation: Multiple Agency Response to Community Hotspots. PeĂ±a coordinated the three-month effort, which eventually involved seven or eight agencies, including the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the Department of Sanitation, and the Department of Buildings.

Their efforts got results, PeĂ±a says. The tenants were all legally evicted. The owner, who was cited for thousands of dollars in violations, now has new tenants and a building that has been cleaned up both literally and figuratively. The effects extend to the entire block and beyond.

“By turning that particular building around,” PeĂ±a says, “we wiped out about 75 percent of crime in that neighborhood.”

What Help Is Available

Government agencies offer a number of programs to improve and protect apartment buildings. These include: --Trespass Affidavit Program: Provides patrols within buildings by uniformed members of New York Police Department. --Graffiti Free NYC Graffiti Removal Program: Run by the mayor’s office, removes graffiti, free of charge, by using solvents, painting over it, or by using high-pressure technology. The owner/managing agent/or custodian of a building must enroll the building in the program. --Narcotics Eviction Program: Targets drugs dealers operating out of private apartments. Upon establishing that an illegal activity is taking place, the District Attorney’s Office can demand the landlord evict all people who knew or should have known of the illegal activity. While the program provides assistance to the landlord, if a landlord fails to act, the District Attorney’s Office will step in. In general, private buildings where an investigation into illegal narcotic activity has lead to an arrest or search warrant are supposed to be enrolled in the program. --Landlord Training: Will provide a series of workshops on how landlords can improve the value of their properties.

Pro and Cons of Police Access

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Along with providing needed help to tenants and landlords, building safety programs raise a number of troublesome issues, including the question of police access.

So-called vertical patrols grant local police permission to enter a given building. Typically, the officers have keys to the buildings and can patrol the building from “rooftop to basement” at any time.

“Anyone not authorized to be in the building is arrested,” Pena says. That includes people who are not tenants, workers, or guests of tenants. “You pretty much have a gut feeling for the guys who aren’t where they’re supposed to be.”

Of course, gut feelings can sometimes be wrong. Timothy Stansbury , 19, was fatally shot by an officer on just such a patrol in January 2004. According to published reports, Officer Richard Neri and another officer attempted to open the door to go downstairs at the same time Stansbury and friends, unarmed, were opening the door to get to the roof of their Bedford Stuyvesant building. When Stansbury pushed open the door to the roof just as Neri pulled it, the officer fired without identifying himself of issuing a warning.

Sainsbury’s death was a particularly tragic incident, but the patrols pose other dangers as well. “For many years, we have been concerned that law-abiding building residents and visitors are being falsely arrested in vertical patrols,” says Chris Dunn, associate legal director of the New York Civil Liberties Union . “While having the police in buildings can promote public safety, overly aggressive patrols run the risk of creating unnecessary tension between the police and community.”

Others argue, though, that the police presence can prevent more tragedies than it creates. Take, for example, the building on West 111th Street that Bonita Lloyd Nettles has called home since 1988. In the early years, she recalls, “it was basically kind of Grand Central Station in the building. There were all of those crackheads and crack dealers running up around the block making much ado about nothing. Outsiders had keys to the building.

“We had no intercom, no secure front door, and drug activity from basement to rooftop,” Nettles continues. “Windows needed to be replaced in public hallways and apartments. There was structural damage within the apartments and in the public areas---all of that I was able to

address."

Part of the problem, she said, sprang from people who worked in the building and so a sense of resigned hopelessness prevailed. "When you have people who live and work in the building cooperating with outsiders, it's extremely difficult to get rid of those people," she said. The super at the time "ruled by the threat of physical force" and tried to make sure the building did not change.

Finally, Nettles and her husband confronted the problems on multiple fronts. They sent out letters, made phone calls, attended meetings -- and had their tires slashed in apparent reprisal. But they persevered for 15 years. "Whatever program was available, we made sure we were involved in," says Nettles, who was a member of her local community board in the early 1990s.

Finding the right programs was key. Nettles got the information through community board meetings and the monthly community meetings with the local precinct. .

Today the building is much improved. One visible sign? The graffiti that once defaced the interior and exterior of the building is gone. Before, Nettles says, "The graffiti inside and outside was unbelievable. That helped to make it easier for the drug dealers to remain there because the graffiti is used as a form of communication."

In taking care of this and other problems, "I never accepted no for an answer," Nettles says.

If people like Nettles work in tandem with the programs, agencies, and officials, little by little, things can change, the police department's PeĂ±a says. "We have had numerous buildings in Harlem, that, because of these programs—the transition has been phenomenal," he says.

"If people want to enroll in these programs or more, they should reach out to their local precinct and get in touch with the community affairs officer or ask for the community policing unit," PeĂ±a says. The efforts are clearly worth it. The difference in Nettles' building, she says "is night and day. You wouldn't recognize it."

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