

Chicago Tribune

CHICAGOLAND

East Chicago housing search drags on

Lead contamination leaves 332 families facing relocation

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Post-Tribune

Like most of her East Chicago public housing complex neighbors, Jalisa Wash has run into problems in her scramble to find a new place to live — away from the lead and arsenic contaminated soil of the West Calumet Housing Complex.

Wash, like many others, has had trouble sifting through a limited availability of housing alternatives and lacks funds needed to cover the costs of security deposits and moving. She found an apartment in neighboring Gary but couldn't afford to put the money down herself.

The East Chicago Housing Authority can reimburse residents for their relocation costs, but they need to pay out of pocket first.

"I'm at a standstill," Wash said.

Nearly 60 days have passed since the vouchers issued to West Calumet Housing Complex residents took effect. They're set to expire Monday.

So far, just 29 of the 332 families who lived at the public housing complex have found a new place to live after East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland ordered the residents to leave. The soil around the complex has high levels of lead and arsenic contamination.

Officials from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development said that despite the initial voucher expiration date, West Calumet residents should not be concerned about the deadline. The federal housing agency plans to give them the time they need to find a new home.

"This is not the normal process," said James Cunningham, a HUD deputy regional administrator. "We're going to give them all the flexibility."

Under the normal voucher process,



Nayesa Walker packs boxes Sept. 27 at her home in the West Calumet Housing Complex. Residents were forced to move due to lead contamination.

residents have 60 days to relocate with up to two 30-day extensions, Cunningham said. But in the case of West Calumet residents, HUD will meet the needs of the residents, he said.

"No one's being kicked out," Cunningham said.

Wash, who had to renew her voucher last week, said she's still looking.

"It's just kind of hard," Wash said. "We just haven't had any luck."

Luck may be exactly what Nayesa Walker had come her way.

Walker said she found a house in Hammond and is just waiting for the paperwork to be completed so she can start moving.

"I get that done and then I can call it a day," Walker said.

Before Walker got the call about the available house, she had taken a step-by-step and day-by-day approach, just like the remaining residents of West Calumet.

"It was very frustrating," Walker said. "But luckily I came up on something."

From HUD's perspective, Cunningham said, the relocation is going along well.

"The pace is pretty much what we expected," Cunningham said.

East Chicago Corporation Counsel Carla Morgan said the city hoped the process would be farther along, but mass relocations take time.

The biggest challenge is the lack of available housing options, Morgan said. Housing counselors continue to work with residents to identify housing possibilities and to look outside the area.

"We wish it were easier for people to find affordable, good housing," Morgan said.

One of the options for West Calumet residents is to move to a neighboring housing authority, whether elsewhere in northwest Indiana or in Cook County, Cunningham said. Nearly 200 families are trying to use that option, he said.

For now, despite the contamination in the ground that prompted Copeland to order residents out of the complex, the Environmental Protection Agency continues cleaning individual residences around the complex and checking mulch to ensure there's no exposed soil.

The city is not comfortable with people still living at the complex, but didn't want to put added hardship on people, Morgan said.

"We're trying to do the best we can with a bad situation," Morgan said.

While housing officials and the city want to see the residents relocated as quickly as possible, there's no immediate danger the complex will close its doors. Cunningham said the East Chicago Housing Authority submitted a demolition request but that's still in progress.

"It's really going to be when the last person is able to find suitable housing that it's going to be over," Cunningham said.

City and HUD officials said there's no hard deadline, but as the weeks go on residents try to move forward.

"We just keep our faith up," Wash said.

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