

Left behind by plan for progress

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Charlene Campbell huddles behind a pair of rusty electric fans, staring at the open-air drug market outside her first-floor window. A cockroach climbs a nearby wall.

Outside her door is a puddle of urine. Frayed yellow police tape and overflowing trash bins mark the grounds surrounding her building.

These are the last days of Ida B. Wells, Chicago's oldest African-American public housing development on the South Side. Campbell's building is among the final three scheduled to close this month as part of the [Chicago Housing Authority's](#) controversial \$1.6 billion plan to replace high-rises with mixed-income developments and private-market vouchers.

Campbell is hoping she and her family can get into another CHA property. Despite suffering from diabetes, congestive heart failure and asthma, she cares for seven dependents, including four grandkids and the 5-month-old son of a niece, inside her cramped apartment. "I have no other options," she said softly.

Wells, opened in 1941 when federal housing policy allowed racial segregation, was a place for high hopes where families lived in new units amid a lush city park. The sprawling complex once housed 13,000, but over the last decade most of the buildings have been torn down.

Today, what is left is a wretched place marked by drug wars and deprivation. The relocation and demolition process, which had been scheduled within the next several months, was sped up because "it is clear that residents who have left projects slated for demolition fare better than those left behind in the increasingly empty buildings," said CHA chief executive Lewis Jordan.

Still, moving up the date has made an already difficult task much harder, residents and housing advocates said. Critics have long criticized the agency's relocation practices as too focused on deadlines and not on the needs of the families being moved.

Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th) said the earlier date had more to do with real estate concerns. She said she urged the housing agency to act sooner after learning that the drug dealing and loitering at Wells were hurting condo sales at the nearby mixed-income development, Oakwood Shores, that is part of CHA's transformation plan.

Christine Klepper, executive director of Housing Choice Partners, said CHA gave her agency about six months less than usual to relocate residents. Housing Choice Partners is under contract to CHA to aid residents. In March, Housing Choice Partners received the names of 100 families to relocate. By Thursday, the plans of some

25 families still were in flux. The CHA normally gives public housing residents six months notice for relocation. Wells residents were originally given four months to find new housing, but CHA later added a month.

Linda Kaiser, executive vice president for resident services at CHA, said the agency can give only 120 days notice when necessary.

"We have better housing to move people to. There are a lot of options available," she said.

But Sue Popkin, a housing expert at the Urban Institute who has studied Wells since 2001, said finding adequate replacement housing is especially difficult for this population. In March 2007, Popkin and her colleagues launched a support program at Wells and another Chicago development to address the needs of what she called the "hard to house."

Popkin said many residents grapple with depression, poor health, substance abuse and illiteracy. Wells families are often large and headed by a grandparent in need of care, and there might be a relative with an arrest record living there, which places the family at risk for eviction.

Campbell, who came to Wells at age 5, fits all the above. In April, a daughter was charged with felony drug possession. Police say she hid drugs in a baby stroller inside her mother's apartment. The family is fighting the criminal case -- and the threat of eviction from CHA.

Campbell has no illusions about her life at Wells. As she spoke, a teenage boy could be heard hawking "X-O," a strain of heroin. Bleary-eyed men -- some of them squatters -- spend entire afternoons hanging out in her stairwell.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

In its early days, the housing development named after anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells was a source of great pride for Chicago's black community, said Roosevelt University professor D. Bradford Hunt.

"People had clamored to get in there," Hunt said. "With a refrigerator, hot water, a bath, and three bedrooms -- it was best housing you could get for the money if you were African-American."

But a combination of poor building maintenance and a lack of federal funds changed Wells. By the late 1970s, Wells and other CHA high-rises became gang-controlled bases for drug operations. Crack cocaine, which took off in the 1980s, made the trade especially lucrative -- and destructive.

"It was utter chaos," Hunt said. "You couldn't create the kind of social order you needed to attract working-class families."

In 1994, the complex took on a further sinister taint after two boys, 10 and 11, dropped 5-year-old Eric Morse to his death from an abandoned 14th-floor apartment.

Resident Madelyn Johnson, 49, draws large red X's across the calendar hanging on her living room wall, counting down the number of days she has left in Wells. She works two jobs after being laid off in June from her job as a teacher's assistant. She says while she works and hunts for another school job, it has been difficult to find time to look for an apartment.

In a letter from the CHA dated May 7, Johnson was told if she didn't find a market-rate apartment in time, the agency could move her and her family to Altgeld Gardens, a CHA development on Chicago's Far South Side. But many CHA residents, including Johnson, say Altgeld is too far away and too isolated. She plans to stay with friends instead.

Wherever she lands, Johnson said she won't miss Wells.

"Memories, you can keep in your head," said Johnson, who fears demolition won't solve anything.

"The problems will just get moved around," she said.

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