

County Targets Landlords  
Effort focuses on immigrant housing conditions.

[By Bonnie Hobbs, Centre View](#)  
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Fairfax County is zeroing in on housing violations in connection with immigrants. But the goal isn't to hurt these people; it's to extricate them from the grip of those taking advantage of them and relocate them to safer, more humane conditions.

"Some people are making lots of money by renting out spaces as small as a closet, or next to a water heater," said David Ellis, neighborhood services coordinator in the County Executive's office. "We're not going after the victims, but the landlords. They often rent out 12 rooms in one house and make \$600-\$800 per room – and I wouldn't want my dogs living in some of these places."

He was speaking at the fifth in a series of meetings dealing with immigration here, and this one focused on housing and legislation. Held March 27, it was sponsored by the Outreach Committee of Wellspring United Church of Christ in Centreville.

The Board of Supervisors created two Enhanced Code Enforcement Strike Teams in June 2007 to address both life-safety and quality-of-life issues. Goals include protecting residents' health and safety – especially in illegal boarding homes and other illegal residential occupancies – and cracking down on people and companies systematically violating county zoning, building and safety ordinances by operating illegal boarding houses.

"For example, if a family's living in a basement and can only leave by going up a flight of steps, there are some serious, safety issues," said Ellis. "In many cases, those steps lead to the kitchen; so if there's a fire in the kitchen, that family downstairs is in trouble."

THE TEAMS ALSO AIM to protect neighborhoods' integrity. So, said Ellis, "Houses with piles of trash and 12 cars in front of them affect the quality of life for everyone."

Jeff Blackford, code-enforcement operations chief for the strike teams, said building alterations to turn spaces into living quarters are often done without county permits and additions are sometimes too close to the property line. "Health, fire, building and property-maintenance codes, plus zoning ordinances, each have their own [requirements]," he said. "We look at all these things and, if we can't get compliance [from the owner or landlord], we can seek either civil or criminal penalties."



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View  
David Ellis

Housing Complaints  
For questions or more information, call the Strike Team Command Center at 703-246-2503. To make a complaint, such as too many families in one house, call Zoning Enforcement at 703-324-1300 or go to [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/striketeam](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/striketeam).



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When the teams receive a complaint, they try to investigate the site within a week. "We give the owner an ample amount of time to correct the problems," said Blackford. But if the situation isn't remedied, it ends up in court and can then take several months to resolve.

"We've gotten about 307 cases total since last June," he said.

"We're currently looking at 185-190 cases, have 47 in civil court and 44 in criminal prosecution. Zoning Enforcement gets almost 7,000 complaints a year now. None of us are exempt from violations; we're really addressing boarding-house and life-safety issues — and we're averaging about 14 violations per property." Blackford then presented several pictures of violations inspectors found that pose health and safety hazards to the occupants within, such as chained and padlocked exits, windows blocked or absent, extreme clutter impeding movement, and improperly installed electrical outlets. One photo showed an open fuse box and wiring panel near where children had slept, and another showed an exhaust pipe in a basement where, said Ellis, "A mother and daughter were paying money to sleep in that tiny space."

Second kitchens installed for a second dwelling downstairs are violations of the zoning ordinance. And often, the door leading upstairs is padlocked. Another tipoff of an illegal boarding house, said Blackford, is a coin-operated washer or dryer. As of March 20, the strike teams had issued 3,276 notices of violation and 1,073 corrective work orders.

IN GENERAL, more than four unrelated people living together — such as two women with three children each — is considered overcrowding. Tom Burns of Vienna asked if there's a zone for boarding houses and noted that the only way many unrelated people in their 20s can afford a home is by living together.

Blackford said there's a difference between rooming and boarding houses and that boarding houses are allowed with special-use permits and provided they meet certain, building-code requirements. "When we go into a house, we require documentation," he said. "We ask people who lives in the room next to them — and they often don't know that person's name."

The strike teams report to Deputy County Executive Rob Stalzer, who also attended the meeting. "In some zoning districts [such as college areas], the number of unrelated people allowed may be different," he added. "When you put eight or 10 people in a house with electrical and water work that's been done in an un-permitted, haphazard way, that's a life-safety issue."

Ellis said the county doesn't go to a house unless it gets a complaint: "We want people to call us so we can go out and investigate."

The county also works with Julianne Barbazette, social work

supervisor with the county's Coordinated Services Planning office. There, 40 social workers take calls from residents with human-service needs ranging from information referral to crisis intervention.

"We're not callous and cruel and we don't like displacing families," said Blackford. "We work with Julienne and her staff to help find them a place to go."

Barbazette said they educate their clients about what to look for in a safe house before moving in. "Now, we ask them how many people are living there," she said. "Is there a door, a window? And if it's too dangerous for them, we help them find something safer. We're not going to leave them in the street. Resources are tight, but most people are appreciative of whatever we can do for them."

Wellspring's Alice Foltz asked if her office helps anyone, regardless of his or her legal status. "We'll help them, but where we refer them depends on their legal status," replied Barbazette. "A lot of them say, 'We'll find a place [on our own].' But it worries us that they might go to another unsafe place, so we tell them what to look for."

"We're not about immigration," added Blackford. "We require some documentation so we know who they are and if they're a family member. We're just there for life-safety issues. If we were there for immigration, they wouldn't let us in their homes — and then we might have tragedies."



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