

Southern California Public Radio

Coalition: 'Slum housing' conditions exacerbate asthma

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Black mold in the corner of a bedroom in the apartment complex located at 1245 East Adams Boulevard. (Credit: José Martínez/OnCentral)



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The Asthma Coalition of Los Angeles County marked Asthma Awareness Month on Wednesday at an apartment complex on East Adams Boulevard coalition representatives dubbed "slum housing."

"There are clear triggers for environmental allergens and irritants," said Jan King, the area health officer for Service Planning Areas 5 and 6 for the L.A. County Department of Public Health.

"Slum housing is frequently poorly maintained, usually with a lot of water damage that has been repeated year after year, such as plumbing leaks or sprinklers that are hitting the sides of the homes," she said. "This promotes the growth of mold, which is clear allergen."

The Asthma Coalition is a group of experts whose mission is to be a collective voice for policy and systems change that will help prevent, minimize and manage the "burden of asthma." Wednesday's press conference was intended to highlight asthma triggers and irritants in the home.

In addition to the county's Department of Public Health, the Asthma Coalition includes St. John's Well Child and Family Center, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) and Esperanza Community Housing Corporation.

The apartment building, located at 1245 East Adams, was built in 1916 and housed some of the city's first tenants. After decades of neglect, the building is infested with roaches and rats, and has mold and humidity problems, all of which can contribute to chronic respiratory problems and allergies.

María Mateos is one of the tenants, and told her story in Spanish through Maya Abood, a tenant organizer for SAJE.

"The boiler in the kitchen exploded and all of the vapor went onto her," said Abood. "And she suffered from bronchitis after that. And it wet the entire floor, and she asked the landlords to repair it, but she had to repair it herself." Abood also pointed out there was no ventilation for the stove, which increases the risk of carbon monoxide exposure.

Sweeping glances of the rooms in Mateo's apartment reveal black mold, peeling paint, poor plumbing and cheap, ineffective carpeting. But the doors are nice.

"The doors were given to her by the gas company, because when they came for the exploded boiler, they said her doors were in too bad of a condition," explained Abood. "They were split down the middle and there were rats that were coming in. So they gave me doors. The gas company has actually done more to repair her unit than the owner."

The building's tenants have filed complaints with the L.A. County Department of Public Health, as well as the City of Los Angeles Housing Department, which is scheduled to inspect the property on May 22.

Abood said it was unlikely that the property would pass the inspection, but that whether it passes or fails, it will be a long, drawn-out process.

"These types of problems are not unique to this property," she said, adding that she's seen the same kinds of living conditions in nearly every other property she's visited on behalf of SAJE.

And those kinds of living conditions can cause negative health outcomes that go beyond asthma and aren't just dangerous – they're downright gruesome. Jim Mangia, president and CEO of St. John's, said he's seen children come into his South L.A. clinic with rat bites all over their legs and cockroaches lodged in their ears. Mateo also had to have a cockroach removed from her ear, which resulted in some hearing loss.

"Families should not have to suffer as their landlords work at a snail's pace to make improvements that are actually required by law," said Mangia, emphasizing that the housing codes are already, for the most part, in place – they just need to be enforced.

But low-income properties, especially rentals, in South L.A., are at a particular risk, said King, and many of the people who live on those kinds of properties don't have a medical safety net if their respiratory systems do become irritated.

"In low-income areas, the admission rates to the emergency rooms and hospitals are higher, and that is because residents do not have ready access to a primary care physician," she said. A respiratory problem that starts out as minor, she added, can get much worse without care, so that by the time a person checks into a hospital or emergency room, their status is "severe."