

Van Ness South Tenants Association
Sedgwick Gardens Tenant Association
Brandywine Tenant Association
Connecticut House Tenants Association
Kenmore Residents Association

May 9, 2022

Mayor Muriel Bowser
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser,

As the presidents and leadership of the tenant associations of six large rental apartment buildings on upper Connecticut Avenue, we are writing to invite you to an informal meeting with us to discuss your administration's housing policies, especially on housing vouchers and homelessness, which have deeply affected residents of our area.

We are most concerned with your administration's policy of using housing vouchers to place large numbers of formerly homeless individuals and others in residential apartment buildings. The city pays landlords exceptionally high rents for apartments, up to \$2,648 for a one-bedroom in our area, driving up rents on those without vouchers and creating windfall profits for landlords. Your administration [has refused](#) to provide the most basic information about these programs.

We would like to be clear that we favor the goals of increasing the supply of affordable housing and of providing adequate housing for homeless individuals. However, some aspects of your administration's policies are harming not only long-term residents of the apartment buildings that we represent but also many of the new residents that the programs are intended to serve.

In 2019, a shocking story in the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that your administration's housing programs were causing serious problems at the Sedgwick Gardens apartments in Cleveland Park. It found that city agencies and other organizations were using vouchers to house large numbers of previously homeless individuals at the Sedgwick, many of whom "came directly from shelters or the streets, some still struggling with severe behavioral problems." The *Post* reported that approximately 40% of the new residents required support services, but very few were receiving it.

Some of the new residents posed a threat to their neighbors, including to other newly housed voucher holders, because of rampant drug dealing, weapons-related incidents, extreme nuisance behavior, and rising crime. The *Post* reported that police visits to the Sedgwick almost quadrupled between 2016 and 2019. Many residents, including families with young children, felt they had no choice but to move out, only to be replaced with more voucher recipients paying the landlord exceptionally high rents.

Unfortunately, instead of learning from the disastrous situation at Sedgwick Gardens, your administration massively expanded the policies that caused it, replicating those problems many times over at numerous other apartment buildings along Connecticut Avenue and across the city. For example, as you are well aware, in the most recent example of unchecked violence, a young mother at Connecticut House was critically injured when she jumped from an 8th floor apartment in a desperate attempt to escape her abuser. This is one story among many.

For several years, senior members of your administration have denied that these policies were causing significant problems. So it was refreshing when Chris Geldart, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice, admitted at a recent ANC-3F meeting, [captured here on video](#), that the policies have had a devastating effect on residential apartment buildings in the city because “what we basically, de-facto created was a public housing unit, because it became all voucher holders.” He also conceded that the situation has created serious public safety issues.

In the four years after the city began widely implementing these programs in our neighborhood, both property crime and violent crime have [risen sharply](#) compared to the previous period, while they dropped almost everywhere else in the District. (Crime is now rising again citywide.) The second district of the Metropolitan Police Department has been severely burdened and forced to respond to thousands of calls for criminal and nuisance behavior. Commander Bedlion and his officers have done an outstanding job in very difficult circumstances, but they are overwhelmed. There is talk about creating a police substation at Van Ness to help ensure public safety.

A root cause of the problem appears to be that the city is showering tax dollars and windfall profits on large corporations and absentee landlords that lease apartments. The DC Authority Housing has approved [extremely high rents](#)—up to 187% of HUD Fair Market Rents—that are far above actual market rates and way above the maximum rents on some rent-stabilized units. These subsidies are the highest in the nation—larger than in New York City, Boston, and San Francisco, where the cost of living is substantially higher than in DC. The very high subsidies incentivize landlords to lease more and more apartments to voucher holders because they can charge so much more than individuals without vouchers can afford. This shrinks the stock of affordable rent-stabilized housing for low- and modest-income renters who do not receive vouchers, including seniors on fixed incomes, young professionals, and working families. Meanwhile, the city has enabled corporate landlords to earn huge profits at taxpayers’ expense.

Some assume that housing providers would attempt to police bad behavior because it presumably is in their best interest to do so. However, these profit-driven companies appear to be doing the opposite—allowing shocking nuisance and criminal behavior to proliferate. The financial incentives are too high for them to risk losing these extremely profitable new residents, even those who repeatedly cause serious problems. And the companies have no incentive to provide additional security, because it would reduce their windfall profits. As a result, our buildings are plagued with the worst nuisance behavior and rising crime.

Deputy Mayor Geldart reports that such problems are now widespread in the District of Columbia. In our neighborhood, these policies have a far greater impact than the possible construction of a small number of semi-affordable housing units at the site of the Chevy Chase library. However, they scarcely merit a mention in your [Rock Creek West Roadmap](#), [Homeward DC 2015-2020 Strategic Plan](#), or [Homeward DC Progress Report 2019](#). Moreover, you scarcely mention that a

main part of your plan to create additional affordable housing in Ward 3 and elsewhere is to convert rent-stabilized apartments that currently are occupied by seniors, young professionals, working families and others into means-tested units, destroying one form of affordable housing in order to create another.

As tenant leaders, we request an open discussion with you about these critical issues. The residents of our buildings and our neighborhood have had several years of frustrating experiences with the housing policies as currently designed, and many believe they have done a good deal of harm. This is not a Ward 3 problem, but a city problem. It is long past time for an open, public discussion. We ask that the public discussion begin with us.

Our group already has briefed in person City Council Chairman Phil Mendelson and Councilmember Robert White. Councilmember Mary Cheh is closely familiar with these issues. We also have spoken to key people in your administration, but for the most part our concerns have fallen on deaf ears. For this reason, we respectfully request that you personally join us at the earliest possible time for an informal discussion of these extremely pressing issues that weigh on the minds and threaten the safety of your constituents in Ward 3 every day.

We implore you to schedule a meeting with us before the end of May. We can provide a private meeting place in Forest Hills, and we will do everything possible to accommodate your schedule. Please ask your staff to contact Harry Gural at harrygural@gmail.com or (202) 527-2280 before Friday, May 13th to make arrangements.

Sincerely yours,

Harry Gural, Van Ness South Tenants Association
Carren Kaston, Sedgwick Gardens Tenant Association
David Luria, Brandywine Tenant Association
Amy Schussheim, Connecticut House Tenants Association
Bill Hawkins, Kenmore Residents Association

Cc: Councilmember Phil Mendelson
Councilmember Mary Cheh
Councilmember Anita Bonds
Councilmember Robert White
Councilmember Elissa Silverman
Councilmember Christina Henderson
Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie

Chris Geldart, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
Brenda Donald, Executive Director, DC Housing Authority
Theresa Silla, Executive Director, Interagency Council on Homelessness
Laura Zeilinger, Director, Department of Human Services