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Mayor signs healthy housing legislation

by Stephanie DeLuca , Chronicle Contributor

Mayor Bloomberg signed legislation last Thursday to expand the 2007 Safe Housing Act by cracking down on unsafe housing conditions in the city.

The main focus of the law, which the City Council passed 49-0 on Jan. 5, is to strengthen enforcement of existing housing code violations in the worst buildings, as well as force landlords to pay for the repairs. The new changes are meant to improve housing conditions by getting rid of mold conditions and vermin infestation, which trigger asthma and other health-related problems.

Dr. Habi Jabbar, director of the Pediatric Asthma Center for New York Hospital Queens, confirmed most of the patients that step foot in his office are from “underserved areas.”

“Mold can cause a lot of respiratory illnesses,” Jabbar said. “Children who have problems with asthma are more prone to get sick as opposed to other children without asthma.”

He also said that residents should rid their home of any mold even though it may be difficult to find in hidden areas.

“People should look and see where they can get help to keep their home mold free,” said Jabbar.

The new law seeks to fix unhealthy housing conditions by expanding the Department of Housing Preservation and Development’s Alternative Enforcement Program. Until now, the HPD would identify the top 200 buildings every year with the worst housing code violations for the AEP. Buildings are selected for the program based on the number of outstanding violations, the ratio of violations to apartments and the ratio of outstanding emergency repair charges paid by the city to the number of apartments. As it was, it only affected about 1,000 units citywide. The new legislation allows larger buildings to qualify for AEP which will increase the number of units affected to 3,500.

Once problem buildings are identified, landlords will be notified immediately to rectify the matter within a certain time frame. If the owners do not get up to code, the city will make the improvements and bill the landlords or place a lien on the properties, if necessary. After the repairs, the city will monitor the buildings at least once every three months to ensure they will not be neglected.

“This new legislation cracks down on lawless landlords whose dangerously substandard buildings threaten the health of thousands of New York City families every day,” said Andrew Friedman, co-executive director of Make the Road New York, an advocacy group that focuses on issues faced by the lower classes. “Asthma is epidemic in low-income communities of color throughout our city, and this bill is an important step toward ending the impunity that is literally taking our children’s breath away.”

Another major change to the AEP is the means by which a building can be discharged from the program. Until now, the HPD could discharge a building from the program only if the code violations are rectified, the outstanding charges and fees were fully paid and the building registered with HPD for continued monitoring. Under the new legislation, the HPD will allow the acceptance of a payment agreement as another means to be discharged from the program. Smaller buildings that may have difficulties paying off the fees will benefit from the new option, according to the mayor’s office.



Mold causes respiratory problems in children — especially those who suffer with asthma.



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