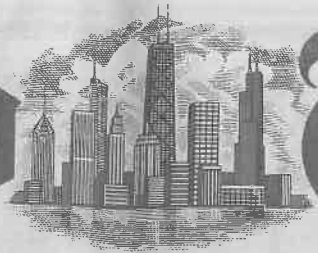


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BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Lead-tainted land spurs exodus

East Chicago residents struggle to find new housing

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Chicago Tribune

For Nayesa Walker, the clock started ticking just over a month ago.

On Sept. 1, she was given 60 days to find a new home after East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland abruptly announced that the public housing complex where she and her three children live would be demolished. The land is contaminated with

lead and arsenic.

Walker and her children are among about 1,000 residents — the majority of them children — of the West Calumet Housing Complex who are scrambling to find places to live.

But they face few good options. The rental market is already tight, and when an apartment is available it is often in a more dangerous neighborhood. Many potential landlords do not accept tenants who receive the federal rent subsidies,

commonly known as Section 8 vouchers, which most West Calumet residents are counting on to help them move.

“It’s big-time pressure,” said Walker, a single mother who is also juggling a fast-food job and community college courses.

Soil tests conducted in the complex registered contamination for lead and arsenic as high as 228 times the level that U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials consider poten-

tially hazardous to children. When EPA officials presented Copeland with the results and a plan to remove the contaminated soil with the residents on site, the mayor said he rejected it, fearing that toxins could go airborne and cause harm. The East Chicago Housing Authority, whose director is hired by the mayor, owns the complex.

“Life safety is No. 1,” Copeland said. “You remove



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Nayesa Walker was ordered to move out of an East Chicago housing complex with lead-tainted soil.

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ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Forced to leave the West Calumet Housing Complex in East Chicago, Jalisa Wash hasn't been able to find a new place to live.

Few options for residents fleeing lead

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people from a hazardous situation and then you mitigate it.”

Now, the small community just east of the Chicago border is facing the largest relocation of families in the region since Chicago officials set out to demolish 25,000 public housing units nearly two decades ago.

The early results have not been encouraging. Only a small fraction — 20 of 332 households — have found new homes, according to officials from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“This is a crisis,” Indiana



officials. Once accepted, the new housing authority will give them a new deadline to find a place along with an application for a 30-day extension to keep their vouchers from expiring. A growing number are trying to take their vouchers to Chicago's suburbs.

The Housing Authority of Cook County has given initial approval for 50 families to move within its jurisdiction. The Chicago Housing Authority has offered people apartments at Altgeld Gardens, another public housing complex with vacancies. So far, 10 families toured the com-

"This is a crisis," Indiana state Sen. Lonnie Randolph said. "These are people's lives. Some of them have been here for years."

Walker is one such resident, having spent her entire life at West Calumet.

She was born in 1986, the year after the EPA had confirmed elevated lead levels on the site.

The 346-unit complex was built in the footprint of a copper smelter run by Anaconda, which went bankrupt long ago, and next to a U.S. Smelter and Lead Refinery plant that operated from 1920 until it was shuttered for good in 1985.

As Walker entered grammar school, a mountain of lead-contaminated dust remained piled high at the vacant industrial campus just west of the complex.

That pile remained there until at least 1992, the same year that the EPA first recommended that the site be added to the Superfund National Priorities List.

But officials instead referred it to a different federal remediation program, which resulted in only limited testing and cleanup.

It wasn't until after Walker graduated from high school, in 2009, that the neighborhood was designated a Superfund site.

Even then, the cleanup proceeded in fits and starts.

One reason was the recommendation of a 2011 study from an arm of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, concluding that the lead levels were "not expected to harm people's health."

The 2011 report failed to analyze lead-poisoning rates in the immediate area around the Superfund site. If the agency had done that, it would have found that the census tract including the West Calumet housing development had one of the highest rates of lead poisoning in Indiana.

Data provided by the Indiana State Department of Health show that between 2005 and 2015, 160 children younger than age 6 in the tract had lead levels exceeding federal health guidelines — more than 21 percent of those tested.

The EPA forged ahead in court, though, entering a



Cherry Estrada carries out her crying son, Joseph Russell, last month after going through their apartment one last time.



EPA employees and contractors exit a home at the complex last month after inspecting it for lead contamination.

consent decree in 2014 with Atlantic Richfield, which had acquired Anaconda, and DuPont, which had operated another lead plant nearby, that would free up \$26 million to start replacing soil in parts of the Superfund site. Testing began shortly after, and the results led the city to order the complex demolished.

Legacy of lead

The East Chicago site, which includes the public housing complex as well as two nearby residential tracts, is one of dozens nationwide abandoned by industries that contaminated surrounding neighborhoods with dangerous levels of brain-damaging lead during the last century.

With limited staff and funding, regulators address cleanup efforts the same way battlefield medics assess the wounded — concentrating on immediate or obvious risks first.

Robert Kaplan, the regional EPA administrator, said the federal agency focused for years on ensuring former industrial properties were cleaned up, not nearby areas where people lived.

Mass evacuations, like the one here in East Chicago, were rare.

"We try to keep people in place when we can," Kaplan said. "We don't want to wreak further havoc on

their lives."

But ever since the lead crisis in Flint, Mich., broke last year, federal and state officials have shown a new urgency.

In East Chicago, Mayor Copeland ordered the evacuation of the housing development, even though EPA officials had charted a different course.

"We were on track to dig up yards and replace contaminated soil with clean fill," Kaplan said. "The mayor decided to move in another direction."

No money to move

Today, mothers with young children say that they are feeling the urgency to move quickly.

Among them is Jalisa Wash, who like Walker, was initially optimistic about her prospects for finding a new home. "They make it so easy when you go to these meetings so you think, 'I'll go out there and find something,'" she said.

They were handed folders with a copy of their voucher applications and the list of landlords.

As Walker started working her way through the 50 names and phone numbers, crossing off the contacts that have since been disconnected or are no longer accepting housing vouchers, she noticed that the list



Guadalupe Vasquez does laundry in a neighbor's apartment last week in the West Calumet Housing Complex.

was created in 2014. Her online search has yielded few results.

Eight months pregnant, and with a 2-year-old son who was tested but did not have elevated lead levels, Wash said she was eager to move. And after weeks of searching for a place that's not too far from her job at a nearby casino, she was encouraged when she found a place in neighboring Gary.

But there are other obstacles, like coming up with the cash to cover her moving expenses, which will be reimbursed. She couldn't, and lost the place.

"I'm pretty much at a standstill," she said.

Copeland acknowledges that the rollout of the relocation was "a little rocky," but he said those types of expenses should be covered and that counselors had been brought in for additional support.

"No one, for one minute, thought this would be an easy task," Copeland said. "It tears up my heart knowing that people who are the foundation of this community are getting uprooted."

Already, the relocation order has spurred legal complaints. The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law filed a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, calling the relocation order "chaotic and unscripted."

The center is asking for federal housing officials to step in with a plan that would stop the flow of what it called "incomplete, confusing and legally inaccurate information" that will ultimately leave many residents worse off.

But the biggest challenge, residents say, is the lack of available housing.

Not only are there few vacancies in East Chicago and surrounding Gary and Hammond, but there are few landlords who want to take tenants with the Section 8 vouchers.

Under Indiana state law, they are not required to. And even if residents are willing to move farther away, to suburban districts, the same issue persists.

West Calumet residents, who are largely black, say that they haven't found many landlords willing to take them, particularly in neighborhoods they consider safe.

"You can't just throw people out of here when no one wants the Section 8," said Lonzetta Thomas, a 58-year-old who works at a nearby nursing home.

Looking far and wide

The majority of West Calumet's households — 211 in all — have put in requests to move outside of East Chicago, according to HUD

plex; officials said that their applications will be reviewed in coming days.

Even with the lead contamination, residents say that crime at other locations, particularly in Chicago, is a more immediate concern. A total of 48 crimes were reported in the West Calumet Complex in the first nine months of this year, police data showed. In the Altgeld Gardens community, which has roughly three times as many residents, Chicago police have logged 495 crimes during that same time.

Copeland, the East Chicago mayor, said extensions could be granted and he's confident that since housing counselors have been added, people will start having more success in finding new homes.

"None of this was self-inflicted," Copeland said. "Nobody gets thrown out. Not under my watch."

If families still can't find new homes, a HUD official said, they will have the option of transferring their voucher back to East Chicago where the search would start over.

In the meantime, for many, it's a choice between bad and worse. When Michelle Plair-Arrington broke the news to her 7-year-old that they were leaving West Calumet and returning to Chicago just five months after moving in, his response stunned her. "He said, 'I don't want to move back to Chicago. I don't want to get shot,'" she said.

"Can you imagine a 7-year-old saying that?" she asked.

Plair-Arrington and her husband both work in north suburban Niles but were willing to make the long commute because they finally found a place where their kids could play in the yard and ride their bikes without fear.

"Now," she said, "all of that's gone."

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