



COHIF

COALITION FOR OCCUPIED HOMES IN FORECLOSURE

**Testimony in Support of
Proposed Amendments to the
Rental Inspection Ordinance
before the
Government Operations Committee
Boston City Council**

September 27, 2012

The Coalition for Occupied Homes in Foreclosure (COHIF) is writing to support the proposed amendments to the Rental Inspection Ordinance.

COHIF is a unique greater Boston-based coalition of approximately 25 tenant, community, non-profit, legal, and government groups and organizations focused on keeping homeowners and tenants in their homes during and after the foreclosure process, promoting household and community stability. COHIF was started by representatives from Boston Tenant Coalition, City Life/Vida Urbana, the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, Harvard Legal Aid Bureau, Boston Community Capital, CHAPA, MACDC, the Center for Social Policy and others. A list of our members and partners is attached to this testimony.

Over the next two years, COHIF's goals are to: undertake a pilot project to promote household and community stability in the Greater Four Corners neighborhood of Dorchester that focuses on acquiring and rehabilitating approximately 30 occupied foreclosed or at-risk units so that residents of the properties can stay in their homes long term despite foreclosure; develop actionable strategies for a new targeted code enforcement program for REO properties; identify models for interim and long term ownership of foreclosed properties that focus on resident control and ownership; and, continue to organize and support residents of foreclosed and at-risk properties. To help achieve our objectives related to code enforcement, we are partnering with Commissioner Irish and the City's Inspectional Services Department to develop a model code enforcement program for REO properties within the pilot area. The amendments proposed could be an integral tool to holding the new major landlords in our city accountable for the conditions of their properties: lenders and banks.

The condition of REO properties is vitally important to not only the residents who live in REO properties but to the communities in which REO properties are located. Conditions are particularly critical to the overall community stability of in neighborhoods, like Greater Four Corners, where REOs make up a

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significant portion of the housing stock on many streets. For example, on Corona Street, a relatively short street in the Four Corners area, there are five properties in REO or pre-foreclosure.

In addition, we are extremely concerned about properties bought at auction by investor owners, particularly investors who have no past experience owning multi-family units or those investors with shoddy records as landlords. These properties may be particularly at-risk for falling below code.

Providing for the re-inspection of properties, as is mandated in this proposal, would begin to ensure that REO and investor-owned properties are kept up to code on a regular basis and that residents of those properties are not harmed by unsafe or unhealthy living conditions. And, almost as important, it would clearly identify to lenders and investor-owners the problem properties for which they are responsible. Even though lenders must register REO properties with ISD, lenders still seem to have a difficult time understanding which properties they actually own. We have had several instances where we are interested in purchasing a REO property only to be told by the lender that owns it that they are not sure that they in fact own it – despite having to register and despite current residents paying the lender monthly use and occupancy charges.

As our main concern is residents' well-being and stability, we ask that the Council and ISD consider any potential unintended effects of the proposed amendments on tenants and to develop safeguards against them in the proposal before it is approved. For example, we are concerned that owners may pass on to tenants the cost of any necessary repairs identified through an inspection. Secondly, we are concerned that if ISD cannot gain access to the properties, that they would be deemed in compliance. And last, we request that you revisit the high threshold to reach the status of "chronic offender"; given the current point system, it may take too long for problem owners to be clearly identified.

We thank Commissioner Irish, the Inspectional Services Department, and the Council for supporting the amendments to the current ordinance.

If you have any questions about our testimony or COHIF, please contact Maureen Flynn, the coordinator at maureenatcohif@gmail.com or at the phone number listed below.

**COHIF Members & Partners
July 2012**

Organizations

Planning Office of Urban Affairs of the Boston Archdiocese

Housing Partnership Network

Boston Tenant Coalition

Harvard Legal Aid Bureau

Greater Four Corners Action Coalition

Massachusetts Association of CDCs

City Life/Vida Urbana

The Chelsea Collaborative

Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation

Dorchester Bay EDIC

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

Greater Boston Legal Services

Project Hope

UMass Boston Center for Social Policy

Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership

Individuals

Roberta Rubin, Esq., Klein Hornig

Mathew Thall, Consultant

Timothy Davis, Consultant

Ann Silverman, Consultant

Charleen Regan, Consultant

Partners

Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development

City of Boston Department of Neighborhood Development

City of Boston Inspectional Services Department

Citizens Housing and Planning Association

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