

February 5, 2025

Chairman Bergquist and Members of the Committee:

Thank you, committee members, for taking the time to hear my testimony. My name is Christina Valdivia-Alcala and I am the City Council District 2 Representative and the Timberlee Apartments are located in my district.

For over 4 years, I have tried to find a way for the City of Topeka being allowed to conduct interior inspections of Timberlee apartments. Anyone familiar with this property knows that even from the exterior view only, this apartment complex has raised long-standing concerns about living conditions within. In my first term as a City Council person, I received a total of 4 calls from residents at Timberlee that detailed stark living conditions. But once it came to try to arrange an inspection or deal in some type of proactive manner – residents invariably stopped communication with me.

Immediately into my second term, I worked with the City of Topeka's PMU (Property Maintenance Unit) for an exterior review. I advised Director Schardine we needed to make it a priority to focus on Timberlee. At that time there were many exterior violations that we viewed and were cited. In March of 2024, City of Topeka Housing Division Director started reaching out to both HUD in Kansas City and Kansas Housing Resource Corporation at the State about our growing concerns with Timberlee. Communication from both agencies was almost nonexistent. Ultimately in the late summer of 2024, both Representative Alcala and I started going door to door to see if we could help people trust enough to let the city in for interior inspections. Shortly after that, it all blew open. Infants and toddlers being hospitalized for carbon monoxide poisoning, raw sewage in basements, broken down central air units and intimidating measures alleged by a number of tenants. These same tenants said when they tried to get their units repaired, management was retaliatory in nature.

If it had not been for the City of Topeka Housing Services, the Fire Department, and other city staff in that first week -there would have been about 20 people, over half of these children – left homeless. HUD did not respond in a prompt fashion until they were pressed. Upon city request and supported by Representative Alcala, we had an emergency meeting with Kansas Housing Resource Corporation. In that meeting KHRC basically pointed to all failures as HUD's. The reality is this ball was dropped by both HUD and Kansas Housing Resource Corporation. We then set a course for having biweekly meetings with both entities and city staff. Ultimately, we had to engage Senator Jerry Moran's office because information by HUD was held back and they were reticent in sharing. All this as the city was trying to decide how to manage what looked and actually ended up being a housing emergency.

As a city we knew we had to change our position when it came to inspecting multifamily housing that received government funding. The City of Topeka, as with many municipalities across the state and country, are in a crunch with having enough decent, affordable housing. The passage of HB2099 will give us the ability to keep a pulse, a more efficient and initiative-taking pulse on housing stock with interior inspections. It is not only beneficial for the tenant, but also for reducing costs to the city since situations like the deep failures at Timberlee cost the taxpayer more than they should be expected to pay. This leaves poor families in precarious positions. All the while slumlords grabbing all the HUD (i.e. taxpayer) dollars they can without repercussion. And we all know that we do not need more homeless people on the streets. Especially children.

Once everything with Timberlee was exposed and the mandated HUD inspections occurred, the nail in the coffin was Timberlee scored ZERO after being inspected. Failure on all counts for livable, safe, decent units. The owners of Timberlee were stripped of HUD's Housing Assistance Program contract. The owners of Timberlee were raking in approximately \$80,000 a month while their tenants lived in a squalor. What a slick set up. And I'm sure taxpayers feel the same. Please note HUD and Timberlee have been in this contract since the mid 1980's.

This is why I come to you today to ask you to please consider passing HB2099. We are doing so many things in Topeka to try to raise the level of housing stock. This is one of them. Thank you.

Christina Valdivia-Alcala

Cvaldivia-alcala@topeka.org

(785) 368-3710

215 SE 7th Street,
Room 255,
Topeka, KS 66603