

Cold snap brings complaints, mainly from old SROs

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lem is confirmed, the inspector starts knocking on other doors to learn whether other tenants are troubled, too, then writes up a “notice of violation” stating the problem, difficulty, how to fix it, and a deadline for getting the heat working properly.

The owner can ask for more time. But ignore it and citations pile up, which can be expensive.

“We charge the owner \$170 an hour for the hearing officer’s time and \$104 an hour for a DBI administrator,” says Bosque. “It gets to \$1,000 pretty fast and that usually gets the owner’s attention.”

But a single complaint doesn’t mean the whole SRO is freezing. In December 2008, four TL and Sixth Street SROs had complainers. The Seneca Hotel at 34 Sixth St. had three complaints in 11 days. The fourth complaint came from a few doors away, the 102-year-old Baldwin House at 74 Sixth St. A Baldwin resident complained in 2009, too.

“I don’t know who it was,” said Antoinetta Stadlman, an 18-year resident and tenant representative who served five years on the SRO Task Force. “It could have been a window left open. But 90% of the time it’s something little that can be fixed, maybe by flipping a switch.”

The Baldwin, like many Sixth Street SROs, is nearly 100 years old. Those heating systems are erratic.

Now under new ownership, the Baldwin is being renovated floor by floor. Already the fifth floor “looks like the Hyatt,” Stadlman says, delighted by the transformation from its former seediness. But the work could have caused a heating problem somewhere, “a pipe or wire or something,” she says.

However, some cases can drag on, especially if there are many problems and a reluctant owner.

GETTING RESULTS

Michael Haight discovered a raft of problems after moving into the Admiral Hotel, 608 O’Farrell St., two years ago. After complaining to the hotel management to no avail, he heard of the Central

City SRO Collaborative and took his problems there.

Executive Director Jeff Buckley contacted DBI and the old, threadbare hotel was investigated during the summer. Building Inspector James Galvis found not just a heating problem — a damaged radiator valve knob — but 10 other code violations, from damaged walls and mildew to a broken window and a faulty electrical outlet, which he wrote up.

When owners George and Jenny Chang failed to correct the violations, they were summoned to a DBI director’s meeting Oct. 8. Their Permit of Occupancy could have been revoked, but instead they were given more time. They fixed all but two violations that involved shower repairs; that wasn’t good enough. On Dec. 15, the case was referred to the city attorney. And before it’s over, DBI will present the Changs with a sizeable bill for its time (including clerical hours) that’s still being calculated.

“Most of the things got fixed,” Haight says.

“But it’s an ongoing situation because this place is falling apart. I still don’t have adequate heat — the radiator is sporadic and I use a space heater now.”

Meanwhile, Haight says, he and the collaborative will seek a reduction in his \$800 monthly rent from the Rent Board.

PROBLEM ON MISSION STREET

Miguel Astudillo, who works with code enforcement and handles heating complaints for Central City SRO Collaborative, has been working on a case for six months — the Alkain

Hotel at 948 Mission St.

In mid-January, Astudillo met with 13 tenants of the privately owned SRO where 10 complained of heating problems, he said. They had mentioned them repeatedly to the owner, David Patel, with no results. Eventually, one of them got in touch with Astudillo.

“Some have been without heat for a year,” he said. “But I got a call from the owner (in late January) and he said he’s now willing to work together. We’re going to file with the Rent Board, anyway.”

When Astudillo started his job 18 months ago, he thought he’d be fielding more heating issues than he has. Still, he had a dozen people from apartment buildings and TL and SoMa SROs come to him with complaints in December. He batted 1,000 with them — he didn’t have to file a complaint because all the heating problems got solved with phone calls to the owners and follow-up letters.

“But many who have problems don’t say anything and use their space heaters,” he says. ■

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Miguel Astudillo
SRO COLLABORATIVE CODE
ENFORCEMENT CHIEF



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