

280 Prince Street 8C
Newark, New Jersey
June 23, 1970

Rev. Dennis Westbrooks
City Hall
Newark, New Jersey

Dear Rev. Westbrooks:

Enclosed is a copy of a recent press release issued by the Stella Wright Tenant Association in regard to the current rent strike at Stella Wright Homes. So often the full story of the tenants is not told. We feel this statement gives fair and adequate background to the current rent strike in our project.

We feel that the City Council is going to have to interest itself in and address itself to the problems confronting Public Housing in Newark. We are looking to the new administration with confidence and hope.

Sincerely,

Toby Henry

Toby Henry
President
Stella Wright Tenant
Association

PRESS RELEASE

June 22, 1970

STELLA WRIGHT TENANT ASSOCIATION

Mr. Toby Henry, President
Mrs. Juanita Short, Vice President
Mr. Edward Satterfield
Mrs. Louise Brummell
Building Representatives

We thank the members of the press for being present here this morning. We ask your patience and attention as we attempt to give you the background to the current rent strike at Stella Wright Homes.

Life in the high-rise projects of Newark can be described in many ways ---from horrible and unbearable to a place to get out of. Many people and agencies influence or seek to influence life in the projects, for example, the Newark Housing Authority, the tenants themselves, Federal aid and restrictions, social service programs and criminals of every sort.

Those seeking to improve life in the projects face an enormous task. Those seeking to exploit the tenants of public housing find easy prey. Of all the groups to weld into an effective unit the tenant group is the most difficult, yet the most vital. It is the most difficult because of the great variety of people who live in Newark Housing and the varying stages of despair and frustration they find themselves in with regard to their environment. It is the most vital because, in the long run, no one will be able to effectively help them unless they help themselves; no one will have more effective concern for their welfare than they themselves do.

Stella Wright Homes is approximately ten years old. There are a good number of the original tenants still living here. It seems in the beginning and even up to a few years ago, life was tolerable if not pleasant at Stella Wright. Housing laws were enforced, tenants cooperated, crime was controlled. However, in recent years, the level of life has descended steadily. Today, in the fourteen thirteen storey buildings which house 1200 families and 6,000 people, the majority of whom are children and teenagers, life has become a nightmare. Crime runs rampant, especially the drug traffic. Stella Wright has it all---pushers, addicts, and drug centers. Muggings, purse snatching, rapes and robberies are common occurrences. The police are seldom seen at Stella Wright. You call them and often they do not come. The services offered by the Housing Authority police are pitiful, totally inadequate and ineffective. Daily, tenants who must travel at night, are forced to wonder if they will reach their apartments safely. Lights in the hallways and especially in the stairways are frequently out, and for long periods of time. Elevators are broken and not running more often than are---and it is a long walk to the twelfth floor. Garbage and trash clutter the stairway continually; this is partially the fault of the tenants, but certainly not entirely our fault. Janitorial and maintenance service is at a minimum and totally inadequate. The grounds are not kept clean. Recently, the maintenance men have been emptying trash in the vacant buildings across Prince Street in order to save walking a few steps.

Early last Spring, over a year ago, a group of tenants began meeting to discuss life and conditions at Stella Wright Homes. The feeling of most people in regard to improvement here was pessimistic, if not totally negative. However, we realized that if we did not do what we could to try to bring about improvement, we would be just as guilty as the next person. We contacted the then-existing tenant league

in an effort to become both knowledgeable as to what was being done and to become involved. We met with little success. People distrusted the Tenant League which had come into existence through a conflict situation. The handful of people who were running it did not have the facilities to do an adequate job. If organizing the tenants is one of the biggest tasks in working toward the improvement of life in the projects, it is marked by the almost complete lack of resources to accomplish this task.

A federally-funded Modernization Program was supposedly underway in which Stella Wright Homes, because of conditions here, was designated to receive priority in both the amount of the 7 1/2 million dollars to be spent and in the time sequence in spending it. The majority of tenants knew nothing about this Modernization Program, even though one of the stipulations from HUD was that it be planned with and by the tenants in cooperation with Newark Housing Authority. Some of us attempted to help the Tenant League in disseminating information in regard to this program. Meetings were held during the summer. We attempted to have a separate meeting for each building. It was difficult and met with a very small turnout, and those who did come heard promises that have never materialized—something that poor people, and especially black people, have grown accustomed to.

In September 1969, in an attempt to get direct information on the Modernization Program, a few of us went to see Mr. Joseph Sivollela, the Executive Director of Newark Housing Authority. The program was explained to us and, again, we were told that Stella Wright was to be given priority. We also asked that a meeting between the Modernization Program architect for Stella Wright, Mr. Herbert Southern of Rahway, and the tenants be arranged. In the meantime, Mr. Sivollela invited us to attend a meeting later in the week with the architects and men from the regional office of HUD. We accepted and attended the meeting. There were more explanations and promises. We requested that a meeting be arranged between the architect and the tenants of Stella Wright so that they could be informed of the details of the Modernization Program. A meeting was set up by Newark Housing through the Tenant League President. However, only a handful of tenants were notified. It was only by accident, less than 24 hours before the scheduled meeting, that we learned of it. On our own, without the assistance of either the Tenant League officials or Newark Housing Authority, we printed up fliers and distributed them throughout the entire project informing the tenants of the meeting. About 60-70 people attended. It was one of the largest meetings in over a year. The architect explained what was envisioned in the Modernization Program. The tenants made a number of suggestions and requests. Mr. Southern said that preliminary plans would be completed about 30 days from that night (Oct. 8, 1969). At that time he would meet with all interested tenants for their suggestions and/or approval. Sixty days after that meeting the final plans would be completed. They would then be submitted to Newark Housing Authority and to HUD for approval. After they returned from HUD the work would begin. This certainly led us to believe that by March, certainly at the latest by April, we would begin to see some of

these improvements. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

It was not thirty days, but sixty days before we next saw Mr. Southern (Dec. 11, 1969). The preliminary plans appeared very sketchy. We have not seen nor heard from him nor of the plans since. He promised a further meeting but it never materialized.

In an effort to help inform the tenants of Stella Wright as to what was happening we printed up and distributed the information we had uncovered, a copy of which is attached to this release.

In the meantime we continued to talk with other tenants here, to talk about the problems and the possible solutions. We all fully realize the one of the biggest problems here is the tenants themselves, but we also know that we are not the only problem. We have gotten together and we are doing our part, but we have not seen signs that the other necessary parties are ready and willing to do their part also.

The filth of the buildings add greatly to the depression that surrounds Stella Wright. Last fall we organized clean-up campaigns in six of the buildings. On a given Saturday we cleaned the buildings from top to bottom. However, when we saw how very quickly they reverted to their previous condition, we realized that our cleaning the building was not the answer. There had to be housing participation and a strong hand laid on undesirable tenants.

At the beginning of this year, we realized that the majority of our efforts had been in vain and were destined for continued failure and frustration. We as tenants would get nowhere until we were united under one voice and in one effective tenant organization. The then quasi-official tenant league gave us the go ahead to organize a new election. Several meetings were held to which all the tenants of Stella Wright were invited. Everyone was given an opportunity to run for office and to meet and become acquainted with announced candidates for office. On March 11, 1970 the election was held and the new Stella Wright Tenant Association was established. Mr. Toby Henry was elected President and Mrs. Juanita Short was elected Vice President. A secretary and treasurer and representatives from each of the fourteen buildings were also chosen.

It was shortly after this that the Poor and Dissatisfied Tenants announced a city-wide rent strike against Newark Housing Authority. In one sense, we were not ready for a rent strike, but in another sense we realized that this was a step that we would ultimately have to take in order to make our voice heard. Just before April 1, at a general meeting, we voted unanimously to declare a rent strike at Stella Wright Homes.

On July 1, we will enter our fourth month of the rent strike. Participation at Stella Wright has been growing steadily. People are either holding their rent or, better, paying it into the special Stella Wright Tenant Fund. We estimate the

strike is at least 60% effective, and even more important becoming steadily more effective. We are going to make every effort to have 100% participation beginning July 1. In the recent election the people in the community have seen what unity can do, and also that their own hard work and participation is necessary for victory and change.

Even more significant is the fact that the people who began to work for change and improvement at Stella Wright over a year ago are now even more committed to bring about change. Victory will be ours. We will not stop the rent strike until conditions here are radically changed. We have enough money in the fund to begin to contemplate making improvements ourselves if the Newark Housing Authority does not recognize the seriousness of the situation and to take the necessary steps to bring about correction. This will include not only meeting with us but arranging for us to meet with the other vitally concerned parties, namely HUD, the Newark Police Department and the City Government. The tenants at Stella Wright are ready. Now it is up to the other parties to get ready. We are serving notice. We will no longer live like this and under these conditions.

Attached is a partial list of demands but the first and most basic demand is that everyone involved have a change of heart and begin to seriously and realistically address the problems at Stella Wright and in public housing in Newark. The principal problems are:

1. the lack of security in the buildings
2. the absence of adequate police protection
3. the drug problem: drug rings allowed to operate openly in apartments; pushers and addicts allowed to roam freely and to congregate in lobbies of buildings at all hours of day or night.
4. an inadequate system of lighting, especially on the stairways
5. inadequate janitorial service
6. elevators that are usually broken
7. lack of unbreakable window glass in the stairwells
8. lack of enforcement of tenant requirements on the part of housing authorities
9. faulty incinerators
10. broken skylights
11. lack of tenant representation on the Board of Commissioners and in all policy-making positions
12. the whole question of the Modernization Program by the Newark Housing Authority
13. lack of adequate recreational facilities within and adjacent to the buildings
14. the presence of roaches, mice, and rats within the buildings
15. etc., etc., etc.