Housing activists link mold and asthma

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The binder contains photo upon photo of cockroach-infested bathrooms inside City Heights apartments. Rats are pictured scurrying about. The walls in children's bedrooms are spotted with mold.

Genoveva Aguilar flips through the pages she says are evidence of how conditions in the San Diego neighborhood's substandard housing are linked to the area's high asthma rate.

Aguilar is the director of Proyecto Casas Saludables (Healthy Homes Project), a nonprofit arm of the Mid-City Community Action Network that has worked for three years to reduce the factors contributing to asthma.

Numerous organizations were involved in the project that last year evaluated conditions at 140 rentals in City Heights, where the median household income is $25,593.

The findings: 31 percent of respondents had children with asthma; more than 79 percent of their residences had cockroaches; and 64 percent lived with mold.

The result: the attention of city officials and 10 small claims court cases, nine of which were won by residents, said Virginia Angeles, who helped with the evaluations.

Kevin O'Neill, a director with the Mid-City Community Action Network, said benefits go beyond the court cases and a January meeting with city officials to address the problems.

Residents have been talking about poor living conditions to outsiders, thanks to local residents who did much of the legwork. These activist residents collected the data and educated residents about how mold and cockroaches can contribute to asthma. They let residents know where they could go for help.

Maria Carmona, whose 2-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter suffer from asthma, said that when an activist local resident visited her cockroach-infested home, she discovered she wasn't the only mother with that situation.

"I was afraid because I know other people who were scared to ask their landlords for help because they had cockroaches, rats, water leakage," Carmona said in Spanish. "They know when they say that, the landlord will say, 'You know what? You have 30 days left here or give me the money to fix it.'"

"It's a fear of speaking."
Money for the project runs out in March. Proyecto Casas Saludables received $321,000 from the California Endowment, a statewide health care foundation.

Organizers hope to change city codes regarding mold before the project ends.

Meanwhile, local residents are working as volunteers, holding workshops and visiting families concerned about their living situation.

"People have trusted us," Angeles said in Spanish. "It's very necessary for us to listen to their problems. ... We do it in a manner so that people don't think programs come in and programs leave, when the problems are still there."

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