

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

\$2.00 • FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2021 • NEWS 24/7 AT RICHMOND.COM • FINAL

“They send us to maintenance and say they’re going to send someone. And then no one comes.”

Delia Lopez Figueroa, resident of The Communities at Southwood

## FAIR HOUSING?



Delia Lopez Figueroa cradles her infant son, Jeremy Solis Lopez, at her home in the Southwood apartment complex in South Richmond. Lopez Figueroa pays \$955 per month for the two-bedroom apartment and lives with persistent mold and pest issues.

### In Richmond’s largest Latino neighborhood, people live among mold, mice, roaches; management says tenants are to blame

STORY BY SABRINA MORENO AND MARK ROBINSON  
PHOTOS BY EVA RUSSO • Richmond Times-Dispatch

Until Delia Lopez Figueroa patched an uncovered vent with duct tape, cockroaches rained down on the bed where she changes her infant’s diaper. No matter how many times she replaces the family’s mattresses, bedbugs bite her almost-2-year-old daughter’s arms and legs. And the glue traps she sets don’t stop mice from burrowing into the walls and scratching their claws against the drywall long after her son’s bedtime. When her neighbors use the shared laundry room outside the front door of

her two-bedroom apartment, wastewater spills into the hallway. The runoff seeps into the living room’s vinyl floors where her children play with their toys. The family’s ground-level apartment floods when it rains, feeding the humidity that causes mold to spread across the closet ceiling. This is what the 26-year-old pays \$955 a month to rent at The Communities at Southwood, a sprawling complex in a South Richmond neighborhood that’s home to the largest concentration of Latinos in the city. She can’t afford to leave.

SOUTHWOOD, Page A6

**More online**  
Over the course of three months, Times-Dispatch reporters interviewed residents and visited seven Southwood homes. Watch videos of those interviews on Richmond.com.



Mari, one resident of Southwood who preferred not to use her whole name, showed the air vent in her son’s bedroom. She said mold returns quickly in her apartment despite frequent cleaning. She said she has lived in the complex for 17 years.

### Officials plan to transfer Confederate monuments to Black History Museum

BY C. SUAREZ ROJAS  
Richmond Times-Dispatch

The city of Richmond and state officials are planning to give Confederate monuments to the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, including the statue of Robert E. Lee and its graffiti-covered plinth.

As part of the transfer, which requires authorization by the Richmond City Council, the Black History Museum will partner with the Valentine and other local cultural organizations to decide what to do with the monuments that were toppled by protesters or removed by the city and state since last year.

MONUMENTS, Page A4



BOB BROWN/TIMES-DISPATCH  
A crane moved the top part of the Robert E. Lee statue after it was cut from the other portion on Sept. 8.

### Doctors say lack of COVID testing threatens to overwhelm hospitals

BY C. SUAREZ ROJAS  
Richmond Times-Dispatch

An association of emergency physicians is calling on Gov. Ralph Northam to declare a state of emergency as the rapid spread of omicron variant COVID-19 cases has overwhelmed pharmacies, testing centers and hospital emergency departments. The Virginia College

#### ‘Test to stay’

Richmond schools will launch program Jan. 10 Page A4

of Emergency Physicians said emergency rooms have been overwhelmed in large part by people seeking tests or care for COVID-19. The group said the declaration is necessary again to open access to disaster aid and allow emergency depart-

ments and hospitals to use protocols that would make evaluating and treating patients more efficient. “Virginia’s emergency medicine system is under threat of collapse due to excessive patient volume,” the organization said in a news release Thursday. The call comes as state officials on Thursday HOSPITALS, Page A4

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# Southwood

From Page A1

“I was making two to three calls every day,” Lopez Figueroa said in Spanish, cradling her youngest. “The [leasing] office doesn’t even pay us attention when we go. They send us to maintenance and say they’re going to send someone. And then no one comes.”

The dangers Lopez Figueroa and her three children face are so common, families who live in the apartment complex joke about them. Then they ask one another if the landlord has made fixes after telling management in desperate calls that ignoring the problems could threaten their kids’ health. “No,” the answer usually goes.



Over the course of three months, Richmond Times-Dispatch reporters interviewed residents and visited seven Southwood homes. They observed mold climbing the walls and covering air vents; broken or obsolete appliances; mouse droppings in living areas, kitchens and mechanical closets; cockroaches; and damaged flooring, ceilings and walls.

These issues aren’t isolated to those units, according to a survey of about 100 residents conducted this year by New Virginia Majority, a state-wide advocacy organization that focuses on issues facing immigrant communities.

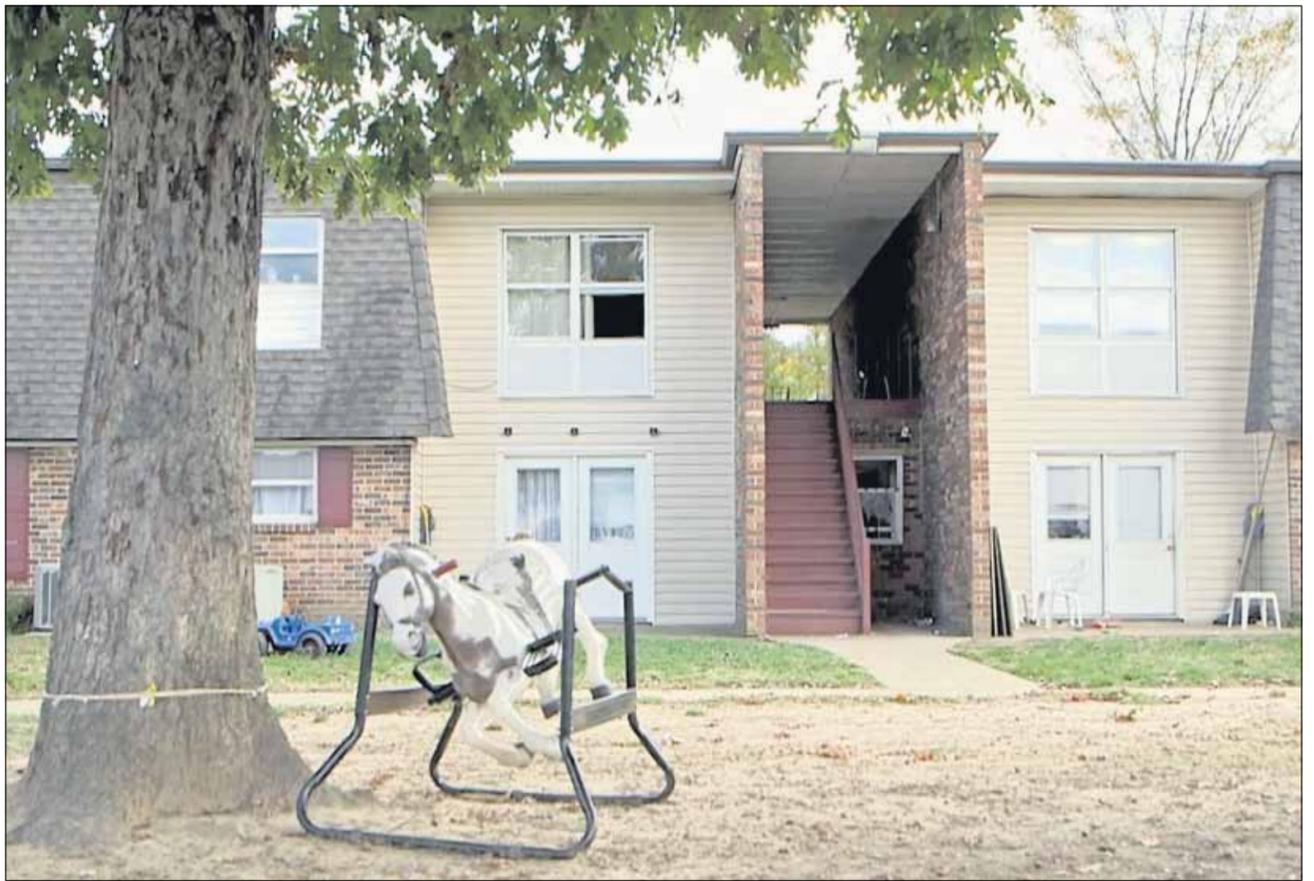
Of the 98 unique respondents, 88 said they have had mice in their unit and 78 reported seeing cockroaches. Seventy-two said they had both rodents and roaches, and 23 indicated an issue with bedbugs. Roughly 60% reported mold in their apartment, and the same percentage said their ceilings, doors, floors or walls were in bad condition.

Carroll Steele, Southwood’s property manager, declined months of interview requests before agreeing to answer questions in writing. In responses sent on Dec. 23, she blamed tenants for the bugs and rodents and for not reporting maintenance issues in a timely fashion to her office.

“A vast majority of our residents are very easy to work with and have little to no complaints. We do have some residents from third-world countries that have poor housekeeping issues and have brought the pest control issues with them upon moving into their apartment,” wrote Steele, replying to questions about three apartments where repairs had not been conducted. She said the inquiry was the first her office had heard of the survey, or issues at those particular units. Repairs at each began that same week, she added.

“Because of the size of the property we receive hundreds of work orders per month and each work order is taken care of within hours or days depending on the severity. We respond to emergencies and mildew complaints immediately but the resident needs to inform us of the issue if we are to address.”

Residents said it was normal for management to dismiss their concerns when requesting repairs or follow-up work on unaddressed requests after maintenance visited their



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

In a survey of nearly 100 residents at The Communities at Southwood, a 1,287-unit complex, 88 residents reported having mice in their units, while 78 said they had seen cockroaches and 23 indicated an issue with bedbugs. More than half said ceilings, doors, floors or walls were in bad condition.



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

Over 60 residents from The Communities at Southwood met with organizers in October at the Richmond Police Department’s 2nd Precinct to speak with legal representatives about their options and the risks of submitting repair requests to management.



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

New Virginia Majority organizer Elena Camacho lifted a mattress she said felt damp in a ground-level apartment in September. Resident Katerin Pineda attributed that to mold, which was creeping up many of the bedroom and bathroom walls.

homes.

Latinos in the Richmond region were also the most likely to worry that making a request to their landlord for repairs would result in a rent increase or eviction, according to a federally mandated report from PlanRVA last spring.

The assessment of barriers to fair housing found the hesitation is worse if a person doesn’t have what most apartments require upon applying: a Social Security number, or “un social” in Spanish. This means “undocumented immigrants live where they can, not where they want,” the report stated.

“These are always some

of the problems that we have,” Lopez Figueroa said. “We fear for anything.”

The 1,287-unit complex is located in one of the city’s poorest areas, where the U.S. Census Bureau estimates 1 in 4 households lives in poverty and 8 in 10 people are Hispanic. The pandemic made the crisis worse. In April 2020, national unemployment rates among Latinos surged to 19%, the highest ever recorded.

If they weren’t laid off, their employers cut their hours at work. And as the conditions at home deteriorated, the coronavirus ripped through their families.

Meanwhile, Southwood Apartments LLC, the owner of the complex and an affiliate of Charlottesville-based Seminole Trail Properties, has collected \$3.2 million in rent relief funds through a state program meant to keep tenants safely housed during the pandemic. The sum was the third most of any rental company in the state as of mid-December, according to data provided by Virginia Housing.

Still, tenants said, the infestations and poor living conditions remain.

Evan Peters, a home re-

pair project manager with nonprofit Project: HOMES, visited three separate Southwood apartments in November. He saw mold, “severe” pest infestations, exposed electrical wiring, significant water damage and failed condenser units, according to a letter laying out his findings.

“I am personally concerned for the livelihood of tenants residing at Southwood Apartments due to the conditions of units caused by lack of maintenance or improper repairs,” Peters wrote. “I would recommend extensive repairs to ensure the health and safety of tenants.”

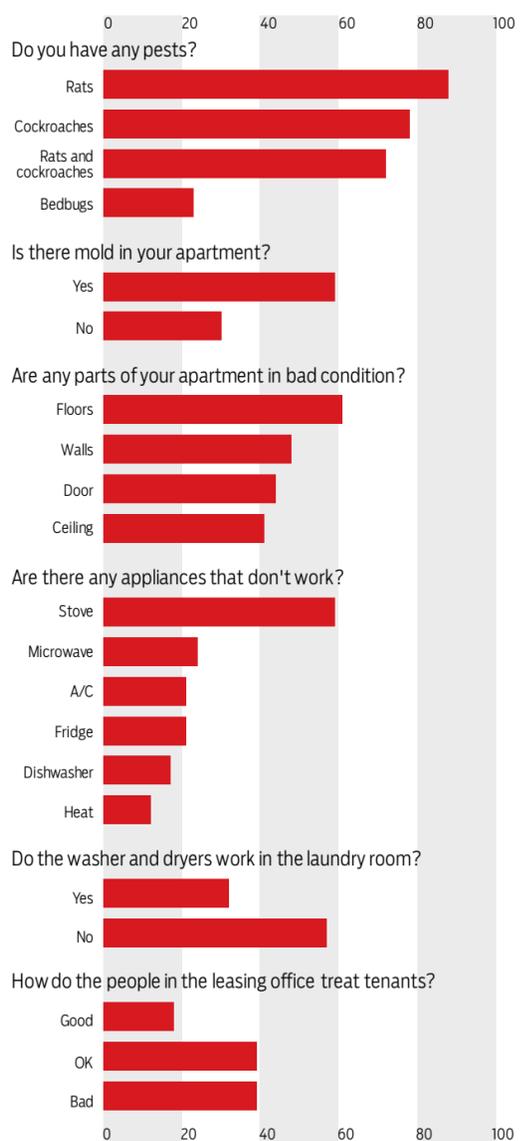
Peters said most of these issues could have been prevented if the landlord had conducted regular maintenance by a licensed professional — as state law requires. Instead, he wrote, they “have been neglected to the point where extensive repairs are necessary.”



Over the summer, Elena Camacho and Claudia Arvalo — community organizers with New Virginia Majority — sent a letter on behalf of tenants to Seminole Trail Properties, Southwood’s owner. They

## Housing Conditions at Southwood

The following are responses from 98 different residents in the 1,287-unit complex who were surveyed throughout 2021 about their living situation.



Source: New Virginia Majority, Analysis by RTD JUSTIN MORRISON/TIMES-DISPATCH

asked for a meeting to address “the physical condition of our apartments, negligent maintenance practices [and] the manner in which we have been mistreated by management staff,” among other concerns.

The rental company’s director of property management, Cynthia Smith, pushed back. Southwood “had major renovations over the last 10 years” and is in “good working order,” Smith said in a June response to the organization.

On Thursday, Steele accused New Virginia Majority and Project: HOMES of having “an agenda” to make Southwood’s management look “negligent” and interfering with communication between tenants and the office.

Steele also said New Virginia Majority is targeting them because management supports police and the organization doesn’t, referring to a 2020 tweet saying “defund the police.” In October, more than 60 residents convened with organizers inside a police precinct with the help of Richmond police officers.

“Here at Southwood, we have an excellent working relationship with city inspectors, city police of-

ficers, and city officials,” Steele said. “We have been praised many times on the quickness and efficiency of taking care of any issues within our community.”

That praise includes a January 2021 letter from Michael Jones, who represents the area on the Richmond City Council. Jones told The Times-Dispatch in late November that the Project:HOMES letter was the first he had heard of the issues — “I don’t want people living that way,” he said — and followed up with Steele to make clear the problems needed fixing.

A spokesperson for Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney also said the mayor’s office was unaware.

“The mayor believes that all Richmond residents deserve a safe, clean and dignified place to live and is troubled and concerned by the conditions described in the Project:Homes letter,” said Jim Nolan, Stoney’s spokesperson, adding that the letter had been shared with the city’s Property Maintenance and Code Enforcement division.

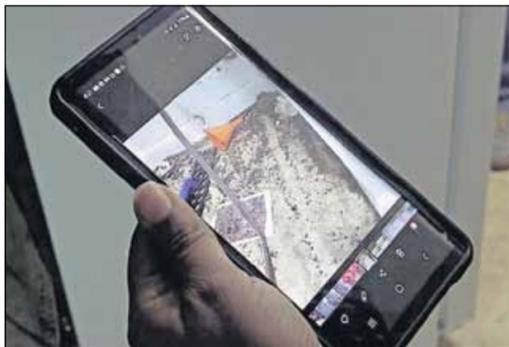
There were no active code enforcement cases at the complex as of early De-

Continued on Page A7



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

In October, a dead rodent was found in a trap behind a mirror in a bedroom in Delia Lopez Figueroa’s apartment at The Communities at Southwood.



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Mari, a resident, showed a photo this month of rodent droppings on the floor behind her refrigerator. She said repairs were made, but new droppings appeared.**

**Continued from Page A6**

ember, officials said. For city inspectors to enforce building code violations present inside apartments, a tenant must file a complaint with the city.

Taking the step would invite an inspection, which could lead the city to deem a unit or building unfit for habitation until violations are corrected. For residents with few other housing options in a region amid an affordable housing crisis, that would mean jeopardizing their family's shelter.

The average two-bedroom at Southwood rents for \$900 a month, well below the Richmond Metro Area's average of \$1,340, according to data provided by CoStar, a real estate information company. The average household income in the neighborhood's census tract is under \$36,000, per census data.

Some residents earn and pay even less.

With pandemic-era protections for renters expiring, the threat of eviction looms in a worsening public health crisis that has already devastated Southwood's largely immigrant population.

Between 2015 and 2018, Southwood Apartments LLC received eviction judgments against roughly a quarter of its tenants annually, according to an analysis of Richmond General District Court data by the RVA Eviction Lab at Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs.

The landlord has filed far fewer eviction cases in the past two years, as state and federal leaders restricted eviction of renters for nonpayment. Even then, one in 20 Richmond tenants who received an eviction judgment in 2020 lived in Southwood.

That's why people stay quiet about these hazardous conditions, Camacho said.

"Out of fear."



**An immigrant** herself, Camacho has spent two years reminding residents of their power, of the bravery it takes to leave behind their families and the country they've called home in hopes of building a life that would make their children proud. And one by one, more than 200 Southwood residents joined a WhatsApp group chat to try to fight back.

"You are a leader," Camacho tells them. "This is nothing. And if you and your neighbor and everybody got together, we don't have to be scared."

To force management to do repairs, organizers proposed residents take advantage of a legal solution approved by state lawmakers in 2020.

Called "tenant's remedy by repair," the law allows a renter to notify their landlord of needed maintenance in writing. If the landlord does not make the fixes within 14 days, the tenant can hire a licensed contractor to make the fixes, then deduct the cost of the repairs from the rent they owe their landlord — up to \$1,500.

As many as 25 households were prepared to take this step in October, but Arevalo and Camacho said they held off because of pending rent relief applications.

"One [resident] told me, 'Woman! They could throw us out of there. And they're

helping us so much with the rent,'" said Hilda Villatoro, a Southwood resident seen as a mother of the neighborhood. "And I tell them, 'No, because if we don't raise our voice, this is going to continue. They receive the money for the rent relief, but that doesn't mean they're listening to us about how these apartments are no good.'"

In November, two long-time tenants who were current on rent turned in a formal request for repairs. Among them: leaking toilets, uncovered vents and filthy ducts, and exposed wiring beneath a kitchen sink.

That same day, about two dozen residents and advocates gathered to support them at a rally held in front of Southwood's leasing office.

Bullhorn in hand, Villatoro rallied anyone who would listen from the passenger seat of a moving Toyota Camry. She pleaded for her neighbors to advocate for their kids to have a safe place to play — to not live with mold, mouse droppings and cracked open floors.

A few mothers picking their children up from the bus stop perked up at her urging.

"Hay que seguir pa'lante," she said. "Mejor llegar tarde que nunca."

"We have to keep going. It's better to arrive late than not at all."

What organizers and tenants saw as empowerment, Steele viewed as a threat to the complex's bottom line. Rental income pays for maintenance and security, she said.

"Most insect issues are created by the resident leaving trash bags in the apartment, leaving greasy pots on the stove and the sink with food. Some residents also do not clean their stoves," Steele continued. "In many of these cases, the work orders relate to some tenants' neglect and do not reflect the condition of the apartment when they moved in."

The property's grounds crew routinely worked overtime to remove trash and furniture residents heaped by dumpsters at the complex, she added. Lopez Figueroa and other tenants said pests and mold routinely soiled their belongings, contributing to excess trash.

At least five Latino community leaders in interviews traced the dilapidated housing conditions in Southwood back at least 20 years. After Seminole Trail Properties



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

**New Virginia Majority organizer Claudia Arevalo held up repair requests in November from two families as she spoke to a small group of people gathered outside the complex's leasing office.**



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Erikson Lopez Figueroa, 5, and his sister Elisa Lopez Figueroa, 2, play in their family's ground-floor apartment. In addition to persistent pest issues, the apartment floods when it rains and water seeps in from the nearby shared laundry room.**

### Risks associated with living among mice, roaches and mold

- ◆ Shortness of breath
- ◆ Dizziness
- ◆ Fever
- ◆ Worsening asthma
- ◆ Digestive issues
- ◆ Fatigue
- ◆ Allergic reactions such as sneezing, runny nose, red eyes or skin rash
- ◆ Contamination of food or water
- ◆ House fires caused by chewed electrical wiring

Source: CDC and EPA

purchased the property a decade ago, the company replaced every roof, HVAC system, electrical panel, water heater, toilet, stove, microwave and kitchen cabinet, among other fixes. The landlord also installed new laundry machines and smoke detectors, according to a list Steele said amounted to a \$10 million renovation.

The landlord has spent an additional \$400,000, or about \$311 per unit, replacing appliances and fixing flooring and HVAC issues in the community in the past year, Steele said. An additional \$150,000 a year, or \$116 per unit, goes

toward pest control. But the problems have persisted.

A woman who lived in Lopez Figueroa's apartment four years ago told her she encountered rodents and roaches, too. Then when Lopez Figueroa moved in, the mold covered her bedroom walls. She said the office advised her to paint over it and use plug-in air fresheners to help with the smell.

And after mice gnawed on her microwave's wires, rendering the appliance inoperable, the property management office told her the incident stemmed from her carelessness, she

said. It took 2 ½ months to replace.



**Faced with** no other choice, some tenants use their own money to try to fix the problems in their units.

Melany Sura spends up to \$200 per month on cleaning supplies — twice what she makes on an average day of disinfecting other people's homes — to limit the risks the mold could have on the health of her 9-year-old daughter, who has had severe bronchitis in the past and has been prone to illness since she was born.

The chemicals leave the apartment with a lingering chlorine-like odor from the bleach. She buys stain remover for any mouse dropping residue and two cans of Raid per week to keep the cockroaches under control.

Then there's her two cats, Duki and Dany — named after the Spanish version of Dennis the Menace — who hunt the mice that run through a hole behind the stove, underneath her sink and through the wall next to her dining table.

The infestation would be

worse without them, she said. If she doesn't keep up her 3-year-long daily routine of cleaning before and after meals and before and after she goes to work, "it's like the mold comes from every which way."

Mold and mouse feces can aggravate asthma and be toxic to humans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

"Almost all of us are sick [in some way]," Sura said. "But I always say, 'If your hands are OK and your legs are OK, then we're OK, too.'"

Last Thursday, Steele said management had made repairs stemming from the two legal requests submitted through New Virginia Majority in November. After reporters asked whether the infestations in Lopez Figueroa's apartment had been addressed, Steele said work started on Dec. 22.

But maintenance has left Lopez Figueroa with mostly promises a week later, outside of patching up one of multiple holes the rodents wiggle through and painting over the mold visible on her walls — temporarily covering but not killing or preventing its toxic growth.

They vowed to return to exterminate the cockroaches, replace her floors and cover any dugouts where pests have made homes. Mice continue to roam and leave their feces on the kitchen counters she disinfects three times a day, she said Wednesday, and a New Year's Day forecast of rain means a soon-to-be soaked living room.

"It does make me a little afraid since I don't know how this will end," Lopez Figueroa said. "I hope that things get better because it's not just for us but for our kids, who are growing up here."

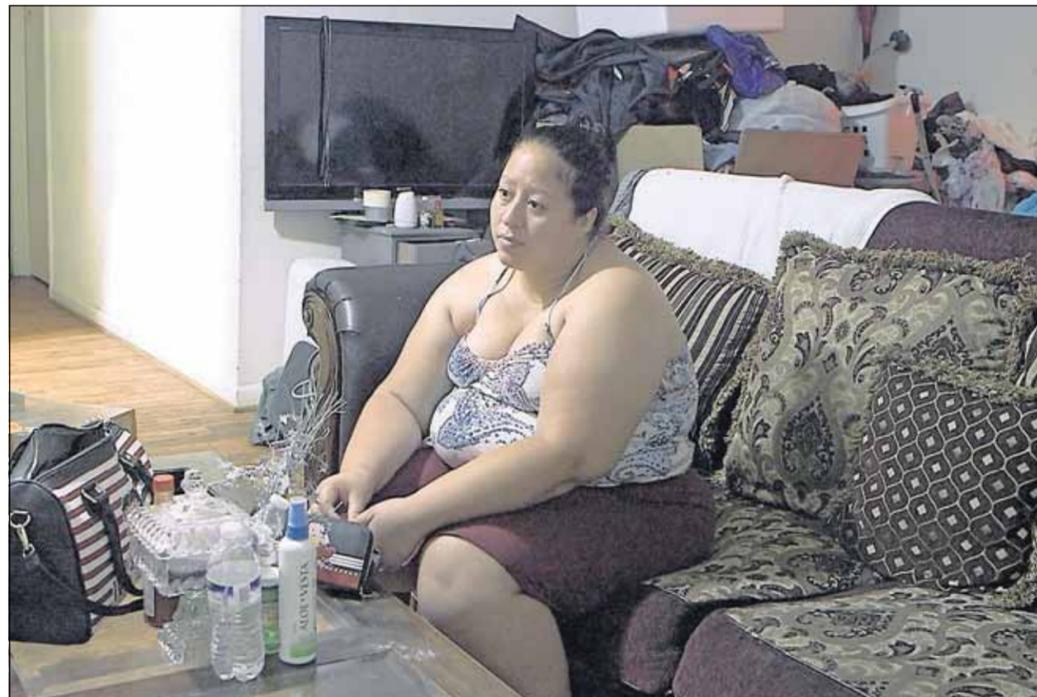
They deserve a clean home — a good future, she said.

"For this, I'm willing to take the risk."

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Staff writer John Ramsey contributed to this report.



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Katerin Pineda spoke with community organizers from New Virginia Majority in September about the mold in her ground-level apartment at The Communities at Southwood.**