**RRHA banned 10,000 people from public housing over the years. Here's what it cost one of them.**

**By Mark Robinson**

Life on the list for Travis Green began with a knock at the door of his sister's Whitcomb Court apartment.

Green, about 18 at the time, found a Richmond police officer outside. Sign this paper, the officer ordered, or you'll be arrested for trespassing.

The threat confused Green. He had grown up in the East End public housing community, tucked off of Mechanicsville Turnpike. When his mother moved to a different Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority neighborhood, he wanted to finish earning his diploma from John F. Kennedy High School. The school was walking distance from his sister's apartment on Bethel Street, so he'd return to Whitcomb in the afternoons until he could get a ride home.

The paper was an official notice informing Green he was permanently banned from all RRHA properties under a policy that housing authority and city officials established in 1997 to crack down on outsiders, whom they said were responsible for a scourge of violent and drug-related crime in the neighborhood. Green was neither an outsider nor a criminal. He was a teenager who was within a year of becoming the first in his family to graduate high school.

"How are you going to tell me I can't go home?" Green, now a 41-year-old father, asked in an interview recalling his reaction at the time.

Green wouldn't sign the notice, he told the officer. The officer arrested him. After he was searched, cuffed and taken downtown, Green faced a misdemeanor charge that could carry up to 12 months in jail. A Richmond General District judge soon convicted him; he received a suspended sentence, meaning he avoided jail, but he had to pay a fine and court costs.

Green was one of thousands of people swept up in an RRHA policy enacted in the late 1990s aimed at keeping the city's public housing communities safer. Under the original policy, anyone on an RRHA property whom management or the Richmond Police Department deemed an "unauthorized person" could be stopped, searched, charged with trespassing and added to a registry, known as the no-trespassing or barred-persons list, for life.

As many as 10,000 people have been put on the list over the years, so many that RRHA admitted in August it was "unmanageable and ineffective" - impossible to enforce in any consistent manner. Accompanying the admission were changes to the long-standing policy that included shorter bans and automatic removal of most names that were on it. But who remains on the list is unclear. The housing authority did not notify those who were removed and police say they will not release it. Critics and some members of the housing authority's Board of Commissioners say the policy changes do not go far enough, and its enforcement moving forward must be monitored more closely to avoid repeating the same outcomes.

\*\*\*

**Back when** the policy first took effect, Richmond had one of the highest murder rates in the country, with the number of homicides in the triple digits annually. Proponents said it would give the police another tool to tamp down crime in public housing neighborhoods, where violence was common and often carried out by people who did not live there.

"It is not intended to infringe on rights ... but when you hear about a situation where kids are sleeping in their bathtubs to avoid bullets flying through the windows, you have to take extraordinary means to address those issues within the law," Tyrone P. Curtis, the housing authority's former executive director, told The Washington Post in 2003. Police and RRHA officials pointed to initial reductions in violent and drug crime at the properties as evidence the policy was working as designed.

The number of murders sharply declined in 1998 and 1999, and again in 2007 and 2008, after which homicides citywide leveled at about 40 per year. Historical data from those periods specific to RRHA properties was not immediately available, police said.

To institute the policy, the Richmond City Council granted RRHA's request to privatize the streets and sidewalks in public housing. With no public right of way, police could stop anyone they encountered and check to see if their name was on the list. If it was, police could charge them with trespassing. If it wasn't, police could ban them on the spot and arrest them for trespassing if they couldn't prove they had a reason to be on RRHA property.

Originally, RRHA promised residents the policy wouldn't hinder their visitors from coming to the neighborhood or result in tenants or their guests facing harassment or intimidation, according to a flier circulated on the property at the time.

Green and others directly affected by the policy's enforcement experienced the opposite.

"They'd search you aggressively, pat you down, shaking your pants, rubbing their fingers up to the side of your crotch," Green said. "And I've seen them, at certain times, make people pull their pants down in the street."

Reggie Owens, who was banned as a teenager for smoking marijuana, has experienced and witnessed similar treatment.

"The wrong officer might see you, hop out and violate you, right there in front of the kids and all," Owens said. "You've got some people's kids who are scared, who don't like the police because of all of the stuff they done seen."

Critics say some of the same people the policy was supposed to protect suffered as a result of its enforcement, and it infringed on the constitutional rights of those who became its primary targets: young Black men.

"It was a device to legalize random stop and frisks," said Steven Benjamin, a Richmond defense attorney who represented Green when he faced a subsequent trespassing charge that carried jail time and heftier fines. "The effect was that people who grew up in the housing communities weren't allowed to return to visit their families, their friends. This was all they knew, whatever housing community they grew up in. The mothers of their children lived there. They couldn't see their children."

Another one of Benjamin's clients, Kevin Lamont Hicks, was arrested for trespassing while taking diapers to the mother of his children in the neighborhood. He served jail time after his third arrest under the policy.

Benjamin and his law partner, Betty Layne DesPortes, challenged the constitutionality of RRHA's policy in the early 2000s in a case that temporarily halted its enforcement and drew national attention.

The Virginia Supreme Court found it unconstitutional. It ruled that police and Whitcomb's property manager had unlimited discretion to decide who was trespassing as a result of the overly broad policy, which compromised individuals' First Amendment rights.

The state appealed the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court, which unanimously rejected the basis of the lower court's initial decision and sent the case back for review on different grounds. The policy ultimately survived, and was back in force by late 2003. Officials called it a "win" for residents of public housing.

A 2019 version of the list - the most recent RRHA turned over in response to a Freedom of Information Act request - had 2,000 names on it, along with the race and gender of each person. Three out of four were Black men.

"They were trying to fix a systemic and huge problem with a Band-Aid. It was an immediate fix that was no fix at all, but at what cost?" said Sa'ad El-Amin, who represented the 6th District on the Richmond City Council from 1998 to 2003. The area, which includes Whitcomb Court, has the highest concentration of public housing in the city.

"When you look at the cost to the people on the list, those were not costs that were considered as important by the city, the cops or the housing authority, because they were Black lives."

For Green, who is Black, the ban had cascading consequences. He was arrested a second time when police saw him sitting on his sister's porch about six months after he was initially barred. His presence there put her at risk of eviction for violating the terms of her lease. When he could no longer stay with her and get to school easily, he dropped out and never earned his diploma. He regrets it daily.

A previous revision of the policy permitted people to petition for their removal under certain circumstances. Since 2018, 17 people have sought to remove their names from the list. Of those, 10 remained barred after an administrative review process, according to figures RRHA provided in response to an open records request. The records did not specify why the appeals were rejected.

Among the changes the housing authority announced in August was the automatic removal of a person's name from the list after three years, and the elimination of a provision at the crux of Benjamin's legal challenge. It enabled the police to ban and arrest anyone who could not demonstrate a "legitimate business or social purpose" for being on RRHA's property.

However, another open-ended provision remains in the revised policy, granting police unilateral authority to ban anyone for "non-violent activity or crime committed which affects the health, safety, welfare, or quiet enjoyment of the public housing residents."

"It's light years better than it had been, but there's an opportunity to do even better," said Barrett Hardiman, who sits on the nine-member board that's responsible for overseeing the agency in charge of more than 3,700 units of public housing in the city.

In addition to striking that language, he suggested shortening the three-year ban and adding an exception for people to visit relatives if they're on the list. Closer monitoring of the policy's enforcement needs to take place, too, he said in an interview, so the housing authority can measure whether it's an effective way of curbing crime in its communities.

In 2015, Richmond recorded a 40-year low in crime. That same year, RRHA's six largest properties had 13 homicides, more than four times the year before. The city's deadliest year in a decade was 2017, when 16 people were killed in public housing, and that death toll has been matched or exceeded in 2019 and 2020. Shootings and aggravated assaults have also risen, coinciding with a nationwide trend of escalating violence.

Brian Swann, RRHA's director of public safety, said banning people from the properties has made public housing safer, but he stopped short of crediting reductions in crime within the communities to the policy alone.

"You can't look at a [no trespassing] policy or any particular policy and say as a result of that crime went up or down; there's too many variables involved," Swann said. "There is no panacea."

But, he adds: "The previous policy had a benefit to public safety, no doubt about it in my mind."

Others remain skeptical. If banning people is an effective way to reduce crime in the areas, said El-Amin, the former councilman, there should be data to back up that claim.

"Either the statistics don't exist or they don't support the program or purpose," El-Amin said. "Either way, it's their burden to show that this disruption of people's rights, that the benefits outweigh the costs. They won't show you that because the statistics can't show you that."

\*\*\*

**Neither Green** nor Owens had heard of any of the changes to RRHA's policy before a reporter for the Times-Dispatch contacted them. Neither had received any notification from RRHA or RPD of whether they are still on the list, either.

"How do we know?" Owens asked. "Certain officers know people won't know what's going on. They're not going to say, 'The rules changed.' "

Now 34, Owens said he has been arrested several times while visiting relatives and loved ones in public housing through the years. In spite of that, he has tried to give back to the Fairfield Court neighborhood. He coaches youth football, helps out with school supply and toy drives around the holidays and does what he can to support the work of the Office of Community Wealth Building's Ambassadors Program, which has led outreach efforts in public housing during the COVID-19 pandemic. He wants to do more, he said, but each trip back is a risk.

The Richmond Police Department withheld the most recent version of the list, citing a discretionary exemption in state open records law. Tracy Walker, an RPD spokesperson, said 266 people were on it as of August.

"The RRHA [barred persons] list is criminal investigative information; the data can be used for a period of three years within an investigative nature," Walker stated in an email. "RPD does not want to unduly prejudice people by releasing the list to the public since it may or may not result in criminal charges for an individual. RPD will not be making the [barred persons] list public."

Swann, the housing authority's director of public safety, said he didn't think RRHA had any way of reaching people whose names were no longer on the list, but that it had publicized its policy changes with a news release. He said he was not aware of any instances where the old policy led to a person being wrongfully barred. The rewritten policy, which he called a "living document," was more stringent, he added.

"We have to be more discerning when making those decisions," Swann said.

Green's second trespassing charge was dismissed, with help from Benjamin and DesPortes. His name remained on the list. For how long, he doesn't know.

Returning to the neighborhood where he was raised meant looking over his shoulder and accepting the likelihood of harassment. Periodic stops, searches and charges stemming from the policy went on into his 30s, he said.

The initial conviction hung over his head on housing and job applications, too, costing him opportunities that could have benefited him and his five children. These days, he lives in Henrico County and makes a living doing home improvement work.

"Coming straight out of high school, in a low-income community, you're trying to duck having a criminal record, and [the ban] started my criminal record off," Green said. He seldom returns to the community now.

Green's sister, Cassandra, moved out of Whitcomb not long after his second arrest. She felt management at the property was unfair, allowing some people to get away with whatever they wanted without repercussions while cracking down on others, like her brother. The family never got an explanation for why her brother was put on the list in the first place.

"To this day, no one can give a reason why [Travis was banned] - I think the reason why is because they said so," Cassandra Green said. "It ain't supposed to be like that. But once they gave them that little inch, they took it as a mile."

**'Restore what is actually, rightfully ours': Gilpin Court residents want community pool fixed**

**By Mark Robinson**

In one of Richmond's hottest neighborhoods, a pool that was a source of recreation and respite for generations of public housing residents has sat empty for almost a decade.

In one of Richmond's hottest neighborhoods, a pool that was a source of recreation and respite for generations of public housing residents has sat empty for almost a decade.

Leaders at the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority have said for years that they will fix the pool in Gilpin Court, but it remains dry inside the neighborhood's Calhoun Center. The broken promises are a source of frustration for some in a community that has heard more than its fair share of them over the years.

"It's hot, and it's getting hotter," said Sparkle Veronica Taylor, a five-year resident of the neighborhood. "For those of us who know about it, we're like: 'When are we going to have this?' It's not like we're asking you to build a brand-new pool from scratch. Restore what is actually, rightfully ours."

When RRHA hosted a meeting this month about its latest push to redevelop the 781-unit housing complex, it didn't take long for questions about the defunct pool to surface.

The housing authority's interim CEO, Stacey Daniels-Fayson, told about 40 residents in attendance that RRHA intends to fix it, as well as address other problems with the facility for which it is responsible. It's unclear how much it would cost and when repairs might take place.

That's unacceptable to Taylor, who said she wants to see the pool reopened so much that she would chip in what she could to make it happen. The facility would provide her a place close by to take her 3-year-old and 6-year-old to have fun. The family, which does not have a car, treks 35 minutes to Lombardy Park in the Fan District to play in the shade.

Closed last summer because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outdoor pools run by Richmond's Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities have returned to normal summer hours.

For Gilpin residents, the closest alternatives for a plunge - Battery Park, Hotchkiss Field or Randolph - are 2 miles away.

If reopened, the Calhoun Center pool could offer swimming lessons and exercise classes that would benefit all residents of the neighborhood, said Sherrell Thompson, a certified public health worker and Gilpin Court's resident services coordinator.

"That will help the elderly. That will help the youth. That will help the adults. I hope it's going to happen. I pray it's going to happen. It's much needed," Thompson said.

The Calhoun Center pool was built in 1972. For years, it was home base for a nationally recognized scuba diving club, called the Black Dolphin Divers. At one time, the team was reputed to be the country's only aquatics program run in partnership with a housing authority.

Citing a need for repairs, RRHA drained the pool in the spring of 2013. The following year, the housing authority said the pool would cost $2.65 million to fix, according to the Richmond Free Press.

In 2015, then-interim CEO T.K. Somanath, who inherited the problem, was "working aggressively to identify partner agencies so that we may reopen the pool," an RRHA spokesperson told Style Weekly.

Six years and four CEOs later, the pool remains empty. It leaks and needs resurfacing, and its filtration and climate control systems need replacing, said Angela Fountain, an RRHA spokesperson. The facility that houses the pool is in disrepair as well. It does not have hot water, and its heating and cooling systems aren't functioning.

RRHA has limited the public's access to the Calhoun Center until it can fix the building's issues. That has meant shuttering the gym and relocating or suspending other programming that the center has historically offered for children.

The agency will work with the city's Department of Parks and Recreation to ensure that Gilpin families have access to summer programs, Daniels-Fayson said.

As for the pool, there is no timeline for reopening it, Fountain said. It is unclear what it would cost or how RRHA would pay for it, she said. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development does not allow agencies to use capital funds to repair pools, she said. With that limitation, RRHA must find other funding to fix it.

The Board of Commissioners has expressed interest in doing just that, so staff "will be investigating the feasibility of such a large project," Fountain said.

Charlene Pitchford, a board member and longtime resident of Gilpin, said she wants to see the pool reopen. But bigger questions about the community's future are front of mind for her.

"It's no need for us to be fighting for the pool if we're not going to be here," Pitchford said. "We need a plan for the community."

RRHA's plans to raze Gilpin and rebuild it as a mixed-income neighborhood date to 2008. But other projects, like the redevelopment of Creighton Court in the city's East End, have taken precedent, as conditions in what is the oldest of Richmond's public housing communities have deteriorated further.

Leaders' renewed focus on the neighborhood could mean changes are on the horizon.

This spring, Virginia Union University committed to partner with the city and RRHA to provide educational, mentoring and job training opportunities for Gilpin residents over the next 20 years.

Next month, the housing authority will apply for a federal grant to jump-start its redevelopment planning. That will encompass improvements to the Calhoun Center, officials told residents.

That all sounds nice, Taylor said. A dip would be, too.

"There's not one person out here this pool wouldn't benefit."

**Third-largest mobile home park in county could soon change hands. Residents worry what comes next.**

**By Mark Robinson**

Neighbor by neighbor, the news spread earlier this month through Suburban Village.

A $23 million sale of the mobile home park in North Chesterfield and its roughly 220 households was in the works. Soon, a new landlord would control the ground beneath their homes. The news sent a shock wave through the predominantly Latino community.

First word of the sale came via a legally required notice placed in residents' mailboxes. Many had difficulty deciphering its legalese; it was sent in English despite the large contingent of Spanish-speaking residents. Some misinterpreted it as a notice to vacate, and thought their families had to pack up and leave. Others' minds turned to the chance of rising costs they could not afford, the prospect of uprooting their lives.

"I didn't sleep for two days," said Mayra Prera, a 40-year-old single mother who has lived in the neighborhood tucked off Midlothian Turnpike for nine years. "I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm going to lose everything, and I have my two children. Where am I going to go live?"

Chesterfield County has a shortage of 2,080 homes for renters making less than 50% of the region's median income, according to the Partnership for Housing Affordability's regional housing framework. With limited options, some families and elderly residents who live on razor-thin budgets turn to manufactured housing communities, or trailer parks. Often, they own the home itself but pay rent to a landlord for the lot. The arrangement costs hundreds less on a monthly basis than other housing throughout the region.

With its 220-plus lots, Suburban Village is the third-largest manufactured home park in Chesterfield and one of its most sought-after. Utilities are covered in the monthly rent residents pay - less than $500 per month for some, depending on household size. For families with children, the draw is the neighborhood's coveted school zones: Bon Air Elementary, Robious Middle and James River High.

On a recent evening, smoke rose from backyard grills. Its aroma carried through the labyrinth of corrugated metal and vinyl-sided homes, adorned with shrubs and vegetable gardens, lawn ornaments and the spare trampoline or above-ground pool. Children rode bikes on patched asphalt streets that double as their playgrounds and courts for pick-up basketball games until sundown.

Rents have crept up there in recent years, but residents say improvements, like better lighting and road repairs, have not followed. At the same time, Latino residents say existing management has not enforced rules equally, nor has it been responsive to complaints or requests they make.

Faced with the impending sale, about 25 Latino residents gathered last week next to the mailboxes near the park's entrance. While stressful, the transition poses an opportunity, they agreed. The meeting was the first step toward the formation of a new tenants association to represent their collective wishes. They hope it will signal to whoever is buying the park that their voices matter.

"If in the future, with the new owner, if something happens, we have to be together," Prera said.

Prera immigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala as a teenager to find work that could pay for her widowed mother's medical and living expenses. Now, she paints houses six days a week to support her two daughters, 19 and 11. The eldest is studying civil engineering at Old Dominion University, she said, beaming with pride.

Prera spends what little free time and extra money she has fixing up the manufactured home she bought in the park last fall for $37,000.

Demand for the trailers is so high that residents say they typically sell the same day a for-sale sign is posted out front. Suburban Village's owner for the past 35 years, Jack Cullather, said he hasn't had a vacancy in over a decade.

The 28-acre property, which the county assesses at $9.4 million, could change hands before the end of the summer, said Harrison Bell, who is representing Cullather in the transaction. Bell declined to name the prospective buyer, citing an ongoing due diligence period and a nondisclosure agreement.

Cullather, 79, said the potential buyer is an out-of-state group that operates more than 100 other parks around the country. He said he received 35 letters of interest after advertising Suburban Village for sale, and countless unsolicited offers even before then. Between the frequent overtures and his age, he said he decided it was time to sell.

"Everybody wants these things right now," he said. "It's the hottest real estate going."

Drawn by the minimal overhead and steady rental income, investment groups have bought mobile home parks across the country from independent owners like Cullather over the last decade. Both he and Bell said the new owner plans to continue operating Suburban Village as one.

The assurance comforted some residents; most still worry about rising costs.

"Just holding our breath," said Cindy Steely, who has lived in the park since the early 2000s. "I hope [rents] don't increase too much, because everything else is going up. I just don't want to see it hurt the people here."

A brochure Bell's realty firm circulated touts the property as a savvy investment with potential to turn bigger profits in the short-term. It poses projected revenue scenarios that hinge on annual rent increases beginning in the first year and sub-metering utilities so individual homeowners pay for their own usage.

"This provides incredible upside to the buyer as the rents are below market and this expense can be easily absorbed," the brochure states.

Joe Ciszek, a housing attorney with the Virginia Poverty Law Center, said those changes would jeopardize residents' quality of life and housing stability.

"I definitely am concerned that those rising costs couldn't be absorbed by everyone in the community and those who are on a fixed income or otherwise have vulnerabilities would be the first to lose out," he said.

A survey of 54 mobile home parks throughout central Virginia found more than half of households that live in one depend on some form of public assistance, like Social Security benefits or food stamps, according to a 2016 report released by the Manufactured Home Community Coalition of Virginia. A quarter spent more than half their monthly income on housing, the survey found.

The homes at Suburban Village are owner-occupied. Many are mobile in name only because of their age or condition. Those that are movable would cost thousands to relocate. If their owners could clear the mechanical and financial hurdles, they would encounter a logistical one: County zoning restricts where they're allowed, and most mobile home parks are at, or near, capacity.

Put another way, residents who remain once the new owners take over may have to choose between shouldering rent increases or selling their homes and entering a rental market with few, if any, options for comparably priced housing in the county or region.

For Debbie Moseley, a 62-year-old retiree who lives on a fixed income, even a modest hike in rent would mean skipping doctors' appointments or deferring repairs. She already spends more than half of her monthly Social Security check on her housing.

"At $493 a month, I don't know where else I could live," Moseley said.

She paid $14,000 for the dark green trailer on a corner lot in Suburban Village after losing her home in the Great Recession. At first, she worried about living there, because of her own preconceptions, she said. But over time, she has grown to love the community and the way people look out for one another there.

"When this came," she said, holding up the notice, "I realized there ain't nowhere else I'd rather be>’