

Will City Hall listen to us now? Following tragic fires and loss of life, folks there often wake up. Think Happy Land. - Corey Bearak, Pres., Queens Civic Congress

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After Fatal Fire, Many in Queens Denounce Illegal Apartments

By [ANNE BARNARD](#)

After a fire in an illegal basement residence [killed three men](#) in Woodside, Queens, on Saturday came the refrain from borough residents: Not again.

From the block of modest wood-frame houses on 65th Street where the fire broke out to the leafy eastern edge of the borough, residents lament that tenants crammed into illegal apartments are a persistent problem that grinds down the quality of life every day, but gets attention only when it becomes fatal.

“It’s not just about taxing sewer lines and overcrowding in schools and parking,” Corey Bearak, the president of the [Queens Civic Congress](#), an umbrella group of local associations, said on Monday. “Ultimately, what happens with these fires, it manifests itself in people dying, and it’s absolutely outrageous.”

Lax building-code enforcement, a dearth of affordable housing and a lack of tax incentives to promote owner occupancy create a temptation for landlords and tenants alike to conceal illegal housing situations, Mr. Bearak said.

Worst of all, residents say, illegal conversions are so common that people feel powerless to curb them — and some tenants who lived in illegal units said they had not even realized they were living in dangerous quarters.

In Woodside, homeowners and tenants said it was well known that many houses on the block where the fire broke out had “extra rooms” in their basements.

There had been complaints twice before about the house that burned, at 42-40 65th Street. The Department of Buildings received complaints in 1990 and 2004; inspectors went to the scene both times but found no violations, said Tony Sclafani, a department spokesman.

There was “no evidence of misconduct” by the inspectors, he said, but the agency was investigating the inspection history.

On Saturday, firefighters were delayed in reaching the victims by an obstructed basement door, and they had to cut through bars on the basement windows, a fire official said.

The [Buildings Department](#) evacuated 1,086 illegally converted apartments in 2008, up from 823 in 2007 and 738 in 2006, Mr. Sclafani said.

After Saturday’s fire, the buildings officials discovered eight illegal single-occupancy rooms next door at 42-38 65th Street, across a driveway from the fire scene, and evacuated all of them, Mr. Sclafani said. He called on anyone who knew of other violations to come forward.

Diane Ross, 51, and her fiancé, Jeffrey Folk, 50, were among the tenants of those illegal rooms. “I assumed everything was legitimate,” Mr. Folk said. “I had no idea that it was illegal.”

“We didn’t know,” Ms. Ross said. “Where are we going to go? It makes me angry.”

A man who answered the door at the house, and identified himself as the landlord but refused to give his name for fear of a run-in with the authorities, said he charged \$107 rent for the rooms, which he said were already subdivided when his family bought the house.

Ronne Barua, whose father, Subir, owns the house that burned, said his family had also bought the house with existing subdivisions. He declined to say if he knew they were illegal.

Subir Barua was hospitalized in critical condition after the fire.

Fire officials are investigating how much time elapsed between the discovery of the fire and the call to 911, said Jim Long, a department spokesman. Landlords with illegal units sometimes try to put out fires themselves, officials say, rather than immediately calling 911.

Housing advocates estimate that there are more than 100,000 units of illegally converted housing in the city. Queens has by far the most of any borough, with 48,000, according to a report by the [Pratt Center for Community Development](#) and [Chhaya Community Development Corporation](#), a housing advocacy group.

In 2005, a fire in an illegally converted home in Elmhurst, Queens, killed three children and an 80-year-old man; a similar Queens fire killed a mother and two children in 2003.

Buildings Department officials say it is not always easy to catch violators. Many landlords have learned to avoid telltale signs like multiple mailboxes and doorbells. And the department needs a warrant to enter a house against a landlord’s will.

Rebecca White contributed reporting.