

Tenants' movement: 'So darn many problems'

by MARSHA BANGERT

Tenants organizations in Lincoln may all be less than a year old, but their cries are reaching landlords, City Hall, the Statehouse and the University.

Six groups have formed since June 1970 to deal with landlords in numbers rather than as individuals, to point out what they say is an increasingly critical housing situation and to fight for their rights as tenants.

"It was necessary for tenants to understand the power structure, to organize to work through this structure for better living conditions," said Maggie Malloy, housing specialist for the Lincoln Action Program.

The housing issue was getting more and more critical and still going unrecognized, she added. People were living in cars and families were being separated because there wasn't any housing.

City-Wide Tenants Association organized in June 1970 because the

minimum housing code was not being enforced and tenants didn't know their rights, Malloy said.

"They didn't know that they didn't have to sleep with rats," she added.

"Every tenant should be able to have decent, standard and sound housing at a price they can afford," commented Bea Richmond, President of City-Wide Tenants Association. "But there are so darn many problems and so many tenants with no place to go."

City-Wide was followed by the formation of Air Park Citizens Organization (APCO) in August 1970. The purchase of the Air Park by the Lincoln Housing Authority (LHA) and rent increases up to 90 per cent without a 30-day notice prompted tenant protest.

"A tenant organization is the only way to make known the general group's feeling to an authority," said Pat Baker, APCO's president. "It is much more apt to listen to a group than an individual."

Tenant groups are forming now

areas, although it was not among the top three or four.

"But you don't deal with problems in isolation," he said. Jensen added that income was the top need and finding suitable housing at a price the elderly could afford was closely related.

"If they had enough money, they could find the housing," he said.

Federal government housing programs have been complicated by red tape, lack of funding and perhaps failure of the city and private organizations to utilize them.

Last fall, four churches formed the Northeast Community Improvement Corp. and submitted papers for approval as a nonprofit organization to HUD in December.

The corporation tried to acquire homes to rehabilitate. The homes later would be sold to poor families at a price they could afford.

The four churches were "anxious to respond in an ecumenical way to a community problem of need," said the Rev. Donald Bredthauer. The churches are the Fourth Presbyterian, the First United Methodist, the Bethany Christian and the Northeast Community.

In spite of their good intentions, they had problems finding homes. Property values were higher than the group had expected, Bredthauer said. It became difficult to acquire homes at a price which would make the finished house saleable to a low-income family.

The corporation has found five properties and is again awaiting approval—this time from the Federal Housing Administration. Bredthauer is doubtful all five will be accepted.

Another organization, the Better Lincoln Committee, also has proposed a housing rehabilitation program. The non-profit corporation is working on details before submitting its plan to the group's general membership.

The city of Lincoln itself has been unable to participate in HUD programs since it lacks a workable program. This program which sets out the city's housing plans, is a federal requirement for participation in federal housing aid. Lincoln submitted a proposal as early as 1965, but the latest version is still awaiting HUD approval.

because "more people are willing to stand up and fight for their rights," Baker commented.

The Tenants Advisory Committee (TAC) was the next group to stand up. Formed by a NLHA resolution which stated that its decisions should be made with some tenant input, the committee negotiates, communicates and works with LHA.

John Jenkins, a committee member has disdained LHA's opposition to tenant members on its board of commissioners.

"We had hoped that the authority was genuinely interested in maintaining good relations with tenants, but we obviously misinterpreted your intents," Jenkins told the authority. "If you are afraid of a militant tenant movement in Lincoln, then it would seem reasonable to assume that you would maximize tenant participation in the decision-making process. This has not been done."

In December of last year, the Lincoln Organization on Utilities Protection (LOUP) formed to negotiate against utility shut-off for nonpayment of bills. Malloy said that the group is also writing an ordinance to make it illegal to shut off utilities in the winter.

Malloy is co-chairman of a group formed this January to promote legislative reform—the State-Wide Housing Coalition.

A coalition of many organizations, the group presented three bills to the

Legislature this session all of which were defeated. Two dealt with placing a tenant on the LHA board of Commissioners. The other would allow a tenant to make repairs and force the landlord to pay.

But the group will try again next session with a new package of bills to be drawn up in June.

The last tenants' organization, still in the formation stage, is the University Students Tenants Union. It is hoped that by next fall, the group will be able to communicate its existence and usefulness to students.

Five hundred Tenants Handbooks have been distributed through the efforts of the ASUN Human Rights Committee. Calls in response to this handbook have shown no University office or group is capable of handling student tenants' problems, said Bill Arfmann, Human Rights committee chairman.

Student tenants with problems now are most often referred to City-Wide Tenants or Lincoln Legal Services.

University recognition and response to students living off-campus and their impact on the community has been slow," Arfmann said. "The Union would hope to move the University to fulfill its responsibility."

Lincoln tenants have organized in six organizations hoping that there is strength in numbers. Richmond said that tenants today are "much better off" so organization may be working as the first group approaches its one-year birthday.

HUD estimated in its 1969 report that poor Lincolinites could qualify for at least 245 units for families and 75 units for the elderly annually under Section 236 (a rent subsidy program) of the Federal Housing Program.

To date, Lincoln has four units under the program. Housing Help inc., a nonprofit organization, is building units under a similar program.

Also being constructed are some 120 individual scattered units under the so-called turn-key program. Under this arrangement, an individual contractor builds units and "turns the key" over to the authority or city, in this case LHA, at a predetermined point.

Another 120 units in a high-rise building for the elderly is likely, according to LHA. These 240 units are the outcome of its 1969 request for some 600 units from HUD. Limited funds account for the cut.

University student's occupancy of off-campus housing has also hurt the poor. Under the leased housing program administered by LHA, 41 per cent of the 1,126 units on the program March 25 are occupied by University married students. This compares with 26 per cent low-income and 31 per cent elderly participation.

In 1968, married students comprised only 23 per cent of those on the program.

Approximately 4,000 married students competed with Lincoln residents for rental properties first semester, 1970-1971. The University provides only 57 married student living units.

The Student Housing Office also reported 4,364 single students living off-campus first semester. The

students often rent large houses which many poor families require, said Bea Richmond. She added that they pay rents a family couldn't possibly afford.

Richmond cited instances where 10 students rent a house for \$190 to \$250 a month.

Recent University and city purchasing in the Malone and Clinton areas also has contributed to a decrease in rental property in Lincoln.

The city already has torn down 50 houses in the Clinton area (18 to 33rd streets and Y Street to Cornhusker Highway) to make way for the Northeast Radial, a new highway. Sue Scott, director of Housing and Neighborhood Development, estimated that 180 families will be forced to move because of construction.

The University and the city both have purchased land in the Malone area (19th to 23rd Streets and R to Vine Streets). Approximately one-third of the original neighborhood remains today, the University graduate School of Social Work says in a study of the relocations process. The study states that a majority of the families who relocated from the Malone area did so in the Clinton area, thereby facing the possibility of a second relocation.

But, there may not be a place to relocate. Scarce housing for the poor in Lincoln is getting scarcer. Bea Richmond warned that people are getting desperate. Some organizations have considered erecting tents in the street to house those without shelter.

The capital of Nebraska someday may have a tent city.

