

PUBLIC HOUSING TO WEATHER THE STORM

The Fight for Healthy Public Housing in Seattle

By Got Green



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Everyone deserves a healthy home, homes that provide each of us with stability, sanctuary, and a sense of belonging.

Unfortunately, in Seattle and elsewhere this vision is far from reality. Working-class households, especially Black and Brown households, endure widespread housing insecurity, exorbitant rents, and unsafe and unhealthy living conditions. This is due to a housing system controlled by property investors and private landlords, whose primary objective is to extract profits at the expense of tenants.

Within this housing system, government-owned public housing has been one of the most significant lifelines of deep affordability for the lowest-income families. However, the state of public housing is far from where it should be. As this report outlines, Got Green has identified significant issues in Seattle's public housing that compromise the health, safety, and dignity of public housing tenants. Public housing in Seattle is primarily owned and managed by Seattle Housing Authority (SHA). SHA has the largest affordable housing portfolio in our region, owning and managing 8,777 units of public housing.

PUBLIC HOUSING DISREPAIR AND NEGLECT

In spring of 2024, Got Green canvassed five SHA properties located in South Seattle: New Holly, Holly Court, Rainier Vista, Barton Place, and MLK Jr. Apartments. Through door-to-door, deep-listening conversations, two hundred and five tenants told us stories of systemic disrepair, which were affirmed by a review of SHA's own reports. Both tenant stories and SHA records received from public disclosure requests consistently demonstrate unhealthy living conditions, lengthy wait times for repairs, a backlog of unfinished maintenance, and a lack of care toward tenants.



Unhealthy Living Conditions: When SHA fails to do thorough, consistent, and legally-mandated repairs, tenants are forced to live with mold, floods, leaks, pests, exposure to the elements, plumbing issues, structural damage, and more. Housing disrepair impacts the health, safety, finances, and comfort of tenants.¹ According to SHA's inspection records (2022-2023), 95% of the units they inspected have unaddressed maintenance issues. Of the public housing units that SHA has inspected during this period, 61% have been flagged with a "health and safety" issue. The most common issues are electricity and lights, plumbing, and broken appliances (such as the refrigerator, oven, and stove), all of which are critically needed in a habitable, healthy, and safe unit.²



Long Wait Times: In Seattle, prompt repairs are legally required by law: 24 hours for electricity, water, and heat in the winter, 72 hours for broken appliances and plumbing, and 10 days for any other repairs.³ Exclusively looking at repairs that were completed by SHA, a supermajority of households in Seattle's public housing (67%, which is 5,862 of SHA's 8,777 public housing units) have waited over 10 days for their repairs to be complete. And many tenants have waited even longer, over 50 days (37% of households in public housing) and 100 days (21%), for their repairs to be complete.⁴



Backlog of Incomplete Repairs: Public housing tenants in Seattle are waiting weeks, months, and even years for their maintenance requests to be fulfilled, and for many these repairs remain incomplete. According to SHA, 3,372 households (38% of public housing in Seattle) have submitted repair requests that remain incomplete and the vast majority have been waiting over 100 days (2,771 households). The most common open repair requests have to do with issues pertaining to roofing, doors, windows, electrical, and broken appliances.⁵



Lack of Clear, Consistent, and Caring Communication: Lastly, public housing tenants repeatedly shared challenges they faced in communicating with SHA. From repeatedly contacting SHA with no response, to being told one's repair needs were not a priority, to language barriers, tenants struggle to be actively heard by SHA. Tenants expressed feelings of frustration, confusion, fear, and hopelessness when discussing trying to get SHA to address repair issues.

These findings demonstrate that SHA is failing to meet their legal obligation of ensuring habitable living conditions and addressing maintenance issues in a timely manner, is not abiding by Housing Quality Standards set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and is not fulfilling their mission of “creating and sustaining decent, safe and affordable living environments.”⁶



HEALTHY PUBLIC HOUSING

This report serves to not only name the state of disrepair and neglect in Seattle’s public housing, but to also amplify the demands of public housing tenants. To start, SHA must fully complete their backlog of open work orders. From there, SHA must ensure habitable living conditions moving forward by making improvements to their maintenance system. Once immediate and legally-mandated habitability issues are addressed, SHA must actively make sure their public housing units are climate resilient so that tenants can weather the storms of climate change.

- **Complete the Repair Backlog:** SHA must prioritize and fully complete all unfulfilled maintenance work orders. This includes addressing issues ranging from electrical, plumbing, and heat, to broken appliances and various unsafe and unhealthy conditions.
- **Maintenance System With Dignity and Without Delay:** Moving forward, SHA must guarantee swift and comprehensive repairs and steward a maintenance system that is accessible, consistent, and communicative. Components of a future maintenance system include: repairs without delay, respect and fair treatment for tenants, accessibility, language justice, tenant stability, worker justice, and tenant accountability.

PUBLIC HOUSING TO WEATHER THE STORM

Living in an age of ever-worsening climate crisis, all public infrastructure must transition off fossil fuels and comprehensively prepare for the storms ahead. Currently in a state of disrepair and neglect, Seattle's public housing will not be resilient in the face of severe heat, smoke, flooding, storms, and other climate impacts unless bold action is taken. SHA has piloted health-conscious weatherization construction as well as energy-efficient decarbonized heat pump technology, but these efforts are far from the scale they need to be. Once the most immediate issues of disrepair are addressed, SHA must weatherize and decarbonize their housing stock to center tenant health and cut climate pollution. SHA has an opportunity to be a champion of healthy public housing.



Our communities deserve healthy public housing that prioritizes the health, safety, and well-being of tenants.

SHA can and must truly fulfill their mission by prioritizing repairs, actively committing to housing quality standards and tenant protections, and preparing for climate resilience.

Despite significant issues, public housing in Seattle has the potential to be the highest standard of what housing could and should be: housing that is publicly owned to serve the common good, permanently and deeply affordable, accountable to tenants, good for workers and our neighborhoods, and nourishing to the health of people and the planet.

HOW THIS PROJECT EMERGED

At Got Green, we build people power in working-class Black and Brown communities in South Seattle and fight for healthy housing, nourishing food, meaningful work, and care for people and the planet. Informed by conversations with South Seattle residents and partner organizations, we identified housing as the most widely and deeply felt issue, with a need and opportunity to develop tenant power in a way that connects housing, health, and climate.

As a model that has brought housing affordability and stability to scale for very low-income households, public housing at its best is a beacon of hope and an alternative to the private real estate market that seeks to maximize profits at the expense of people's health, safety, and well-being. Curious about the potential of green public housing, Got Green decided to canvass public housing communities in South Seattle to learn about the issues public housing tenants are facing.



For decades, public housing has been severely under attack. It has been defunded, stigmatized, demolished, and sold off to the predatory real estate industry. As a result, tenants are living in uncomfortable, unsafe, and unhealthy conditions that include leaks, mold, pests, broken appliances, crumbling structures, poor ventilation, and more. Tenants consistently shared with us the dire state of their living conditions and the struggles they face in trying to convince Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) to address their most basic maintenance needs.

Informed by hundreds of door-to-door conversations with tenants, Got Green decided to focus our work on organizing public housing tenants and fighting for both repairs and retrofits of Seattle's public housing. Got Green positions the fight for repairs within a larger vision of climate and housing justice where public housing is fully weatherized, decarbonized, and healthy for people and the planet.

To fully weather the storms ahead, we need a stable housing system that provides public, permanently affordable, healthy homes for all.

Rooted in a community-based, multi-issue organizing tradition, Got Green believes that housing, health, and climate are very much connected, public housing communities are dynamic spaces of multiracial working-class power, and public housing is a core piece of a green social safety net. **These are the pillars informing our fight for healthy public housing in Seattle.**

HOUSING, HEALTH, AND CLIMATE

Housing that is allowed to fall into disrepair harms our communities and climate. Housing that is not consistently maintained and weatherized exacerbates unsafe and unhealthy living conditions. It exposes us to the elements, such as severe heat, cold drafts, wildfire smoke, flooding, and more. Housing powered by fossil fuels contributes to climate pollution, which compromises our health and our collective future. The fight for healthy housing is a fight for our health and our climate. Public housing in Seattle has the potential to be a celebrated housing model that centers tenant health and climate justice.

WORKING-CLASS POWER

Public housing communities are bastions of working-class power.⁷ As gentrification has profoundly altered the composition of our city, the largest and densest concentrations of working-class Black and Brown people are often public housing communities. Public housing tenants are positioned to be a leading force in challenging displacement and disrepair, as well as pollution and profiteering.

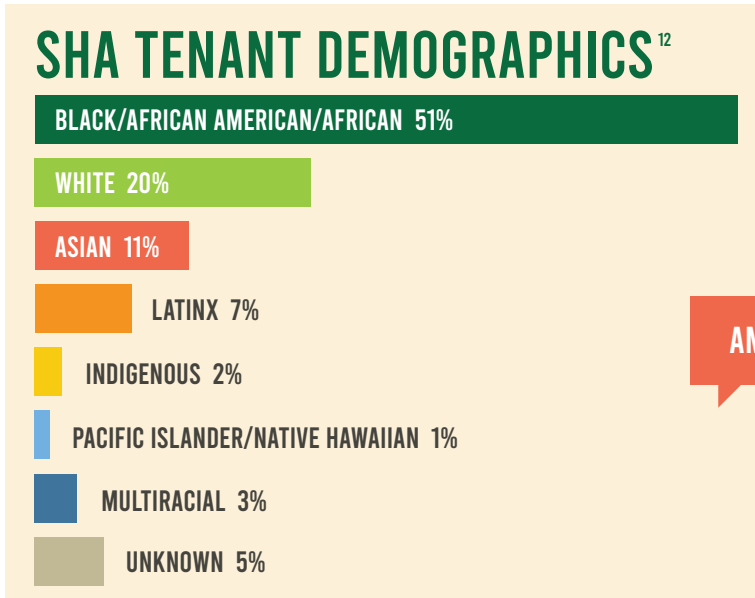
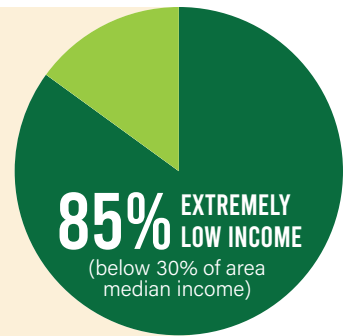
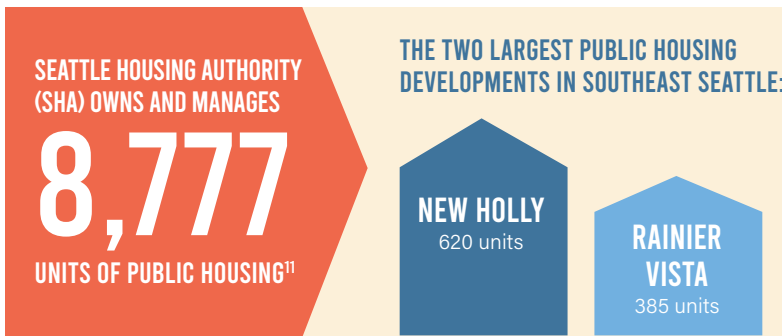
PUBLIC GOODS

Got Green fights for a future where our basic needs (housing, healthcare, childcare, education, energy, food, transit) are universal public goods, not commodities controlled by the market. We believe that a strong and well-funded public sector must expand the provision of the public goods that we need to thrive, including public housing. Despite forceful efforts, public housing has not yet been completely dismantled and privatized by the real estate industry. The health of a city is not measured by the health (i.e. profitability) of the real estate market, but rather the literal health, stability, and power of the people who live and work in the city.⁸ All existing public housing must be defended, improved, and expanded.

HOUSING IN SEATTLE



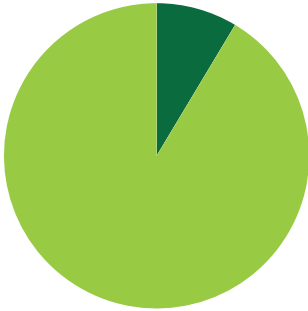
RENT BURDENED = 30% OR MORE OF INCOME SPENT ON HOUSING COSTS



TOP NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGES¹³



Only 8.6% of Seattle’s housing stock is considered affordable housing. This consists of a patchwork of public housing, non-profit housing, community land trusts, and publicly-subsidized privately-owned housing (e.g. Section 8 housing choice vouchers).¹⁴ Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) is the largest owner and manager of affordable housing in Seattle.¹⁵ With that said, SHA’s public housing is only 2% of housing units in Seattle. **Although the size of Seattle’s public housing stock is comparable to other major cities in the US, it is minuscule when compared to places around the world: 80% of Singapore’s population and 60% of Vienna’s population live in publicly owned social housing.**¹⁶



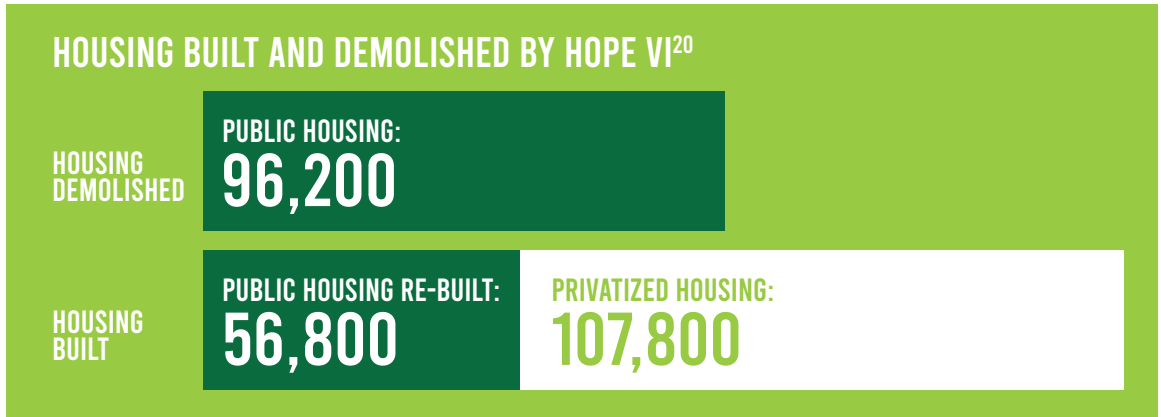
ONLY 8.6%
OF SEATTLE'S HOUSING STOCK IS
CONSIDERED AFFORDABLE HOUSING

SHA is a quasi-governmental entity with ties to, but not under the exclusive jurisdiction of, the City of Seattle, King County, WA State, and the federal government via the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). SHA was founded in the midst of the New Deal in the 1940s and was conceived of as a project to clear slums, create jobs, and house the poor. SHA's first development was Yesler Terrace. **While it was the first racially integrated public housing development in the nation, it displaced many of the communities living on Yesler at the time (one of the few areas Black and Brown residents could live in Seattle) and disallowed people of Japanese descent, in compliance with racist internment orders.** Ultimately, SHA's early developments primarily focused on providing housing for defense workers, military families, and veterans. Wartime funds were used to develop Holly Park, Rainier Vista, and High Point.¹⁷

RAINIER VALLEY

Got Green's work is rooted in the Rainier Valley of South Seattle, an area colonized by white settlers in the late 19th century, with the lumber industry and the Rainier Avenue Electric Railway shaping the area during this time. In the early 20th century, Rainier Valley was known as the "garlic gulch" due to the significant community of Italian workers. Additionally, there were many Japanese families that lived in the neighborhood, prior to being sent to concentration camps during WWII.¹⁸ The war industries and development boom resulted in an influx of many communities into the Rainier Valley, especially African Americans during the second great migration from the South during the mid-century. Black folks had limited places to reside in Seattle due to the living legacy of racially restrictive covenants and redlining. As a result of the United States' military and economic foreign policy in different corners of the world, people were displaced from their homelands and many made the Rainier Valley their home, especially people from Latin America, Vietnam, the Philippines, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.¹⁹

Starting in the Clinton administration, there was a profound dismantling of public housing via HOPE VI, a program of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which provided multimillion dollar federal grants to public housing authorities (PHAs) if they sold significant tracts of their land to private real estate developers. **This resulted in a national net decrease in public housing units:** 96,200 units of public housing demolished, 56,800 units of public housing rebuilt, and 107,800 units of privatized housing built.²⁰



HOPE VI happened alongside the passage of the national Faircloth Amendment, which limits the number of public housing units. For the economic elite, HOPE VI resulted in moving public land into the hands of the private real estate market. For public housing authorities, the selling of public land was rationalized as a revenue source since federal funds for public housing were dwindling.

In Seattle, HOPE VI led to the controversial demolition and redevelopment of Holly Park, Rainier Vista, High Point, and Yesler Terrace public housing communities, beginning in the 1990s and spanning to today. A significant amount of public housing was demolished and the land sold to private developers for market-rate housing and commercial real estate.²¹ This policy was actively opposed and challenged by public housing tenants and community organizations. **Even as modest concessions were won in these fights, the lives of tenants were uprooted, their dignity was compromised, and neighborhoods were reshaped to lucratively benefit the private real estate industry.**²²

In 2014, SHA proposed Stepping Forward, a plan that would have raised the rents of public housing tenants by 400%. SHA claimed this rent gouging proposal would be the only path to addressing rampant disrepair. Public housing tenants in Seattle erupted in rage at this plan, leading to a series of multiracial and multilingual actions where they rallied against “stepping backwards.” **Through this organizing, tenants successfully forced SHA to not move forward with the rent hikes.**²³ From HOPE VI and Stepping Forward to today’s fight for healthy public housing, public housing tenants in Seattle continue to organize across race, language, and culture to fight for stable, affordable, and healthy public housing.

FEDERAL CUTS TO HOUSING & OUR COMMUNITY

The federal government is actively engaging in an all out assault on the public sector's social safety net. Due to the sweeping cuts, public housing tenants are on the verge of losing not only their housing, but also their food stamps, healthcare, cash assistance, and more. The few public agencies with increased funding are Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), police and prisons, and the war machine, all of which threaten our collective safety, especially in Black and Brown communities. In particular, Somali daycare providers have been targeted, and there is a vibrant network of East African home daycares in Seattle's public housing.



As promised on the campaign trail (and solidified in federal budgets, bills, and orders), there is an active attempt to majorly dismantle HUD, a process that is likely to result in the closure of the northwest's regional HUD office (located in Seattle), mass firings of HUD workers, and the freezing of HUD grants.²⁴ PHAs heavily rely on funding from HUD. Under these conditions, PHAs will likely let their public housing units go into even further disrepair or will opt to sell to the private real estate market.

Additionally, HUD and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are deeply collaborating to target immigrants in public housing.²⁵ This includes HUD's "Cleaning House" order to force public housing authorities to verify citizenship status of all tenants in HUD-funded housing and will financially punish PHAs that do not comply, share data, and ultimately evict mixed status families.

Without grassroots pressure, profound disrepair and displacement are on the horizon. While SHA has publicly stated they will meet the national cuts by committing to "put people first" [and stay] focused on its mission of providing affordable, safe and stable housing,²⁶ it will be the organized power of public housing tenants that hold SHA accountable to their commitment. These federal policies are a threat to the homes we all deserve, homes that provide safety from state violence, connection to our loved ones, and sanctuary to breathe clean air.

THE STATE OF DISREPAIR & NEGLECT IN SEATTLE'S PUBLIC HOUSING

This section provides an overview of the research we collected through door-to-door conversations with tenants, as well as public records obtained from public disclosure requests to understand the scale and severity of disrepair and neglect. **Throughout the process, we routinely found that the public housing system is unhealthy, unresponsive, and underfunded, leading to negative health impacts for families, communities, and the planet.**

Got Green went door-to-door at public housing communities across Southeast Seattle, specifically: New Holly, Holly Court, Rainier Vista, Barton Place, and MLK Jr. Apartments. **Across five properties, we talked to 205 tenants,** engaging in conversations that lasted between fifteen minutes to over an hour. **Tenants shared about unhealthy housing conditions, SHA's inconsistent communication, deferred maintenance, and incomplete repairs.**

As we were surveying tenants, we were not merely acting as researchers, but rather were community organizers, inviting tenants to be curious, acknowledge their power, and be a part of the solution. Although we did collect contact and demographic information during these conversations, this report intentionally does not disclose the names or identifying characteristics of tenants.



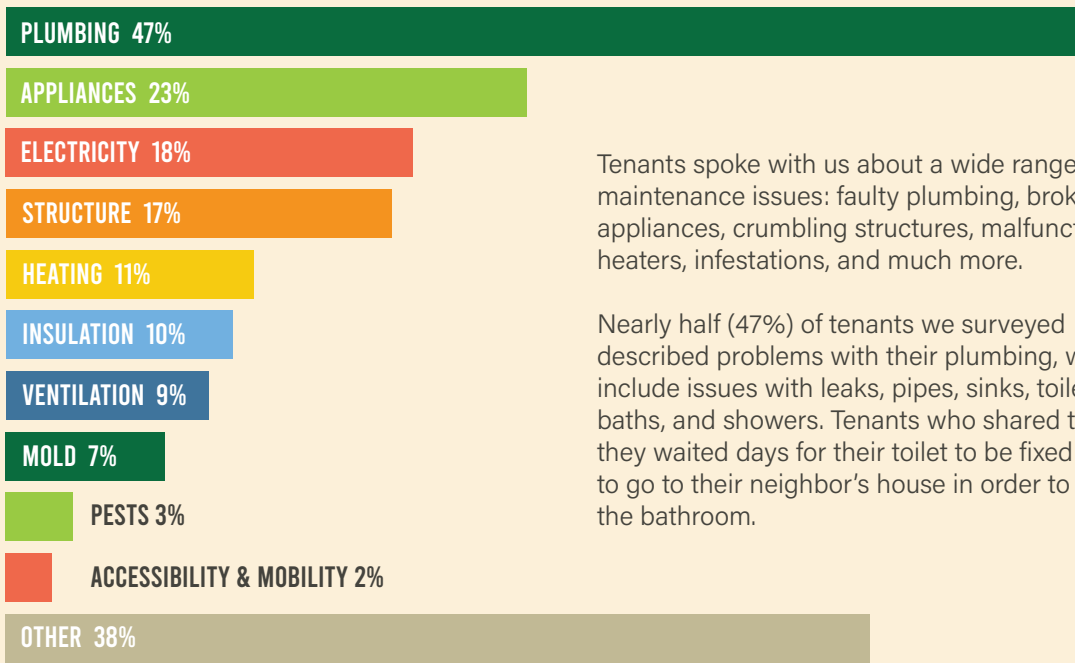
Got Green supplemented our door-to-door data collection with records from SHA in order to get an overview of the scope of the repair backlog on SHA's end. In late 2023, Got Green submitted a public disclosure request to SHA seeking data about SHA's maintenance work order requests, inspection records, repair backlog, weatherization, carbon footprint, and resident health. In addition to these records, our friends from the King County Housing Advocacy Collaboration (KCHAC) have shared with us their own findings, which include information about disability grievances, language access, and disrepair issues. Lastly, we submitted additional public disclosure requests to City departments that receive complaints from SHA tenants: Seattle Department of Construction and Inspection (SDCI) and Seattle's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). SDCI provided a public database of active cases of reported code and tenant protection violations, of which several are at SHA addresses. OCR provided us with a lengthy dossier of documents about various instances of discrimination at SHA.

UNHEALTHY CONDITIONS & LONG WAIT TIMES

Informed by a community survey of public housing tenants and SHA's records, Got Green found that Seattle's public housing is mired by unhealthy living conditions, lengthy wait times for repairs, a backlog of unfinished maintenance, and a lack of care toward tenants. The following section is an outline and analysis of our core findings. The statistics come from numerous data sources (i.e. Got Green's survey and various records from SHA) and the quotes are stories, anecdotes, and reflections from public housing tenants that Got Green talked to between our initial spring 2024 canvass through summer 2025. We begin by outlining the most common repair issues and end this section by discussing the wait times for repairs.

MOST COMMON ISSUES:

We asked 205 public housing tenants in South Seattle what repair issues they have asked SHA to fix in their housing unit. In Got Green's survey, tenants could choose more than one issue. The percentages indicate how many of the tenants we spoke to named this as a repair issue they needed addressed by SHA.²⁷



Tenants spoke with us about a wide range of maintenance issues: faulty plumbing, broken appliances, crumbling structures, malfunctioning heaters, infestations, and much more.

Nearly half (47%) of tenants we surveyed described problems with their plumbing, which include issues with leaks, pipes, sinks, toilets, baths, and showers. Tenants who shared that they waited days for their toilet to be fixed had to go to their neighbor's house in order to use the bathroom.



In the height of winter, the absence of adequate insulation and routine maintenance are often laid bare. **Tenants shared stories of leaks that continued even after the maintenance team addressed flooding issues, as the repairs that were made were not adequate.**

One tenant shared how their pipes froze, which ended up causing a major flood, a collapsed ceiling (between the first and second floor), severe water damage throughout the unit, and family members feeling sick after spending a few minutes inside the flooded house with insulation issues and bad air quality. Temporary accommodations were offered by SHA to this tenant, which is not always the case. However, these accommodations were located on the other side of town in North Seattle, which would have further disrupted the family's life by being away from their community, work, and activities in South Seattle.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of the tenants we spoke to reported issues with their appliances. Many tenants talked about experiencing issues with their stove, where at least one (and sometimes multiple) burners on their stove would be out. This presents a challenge in cooking meals for their family, oftentimes with multiple generations living in one household. Tenants also reported issues with their refrigerator, which is a very time-sensitive issue as perishable food will spoil quickly. Tenants described waiting so long for repairs that they replaced broken appliances with their own money, a responsibility that should be covered by the landlord. This has included instances of tenants paying for new refrigerators, stoves, and washing machines. **Ultimately, an inconsistent and ineffective repair system has impacted tenants' ability to meet their basic need of feeding themselves and their families.**

A tenant runs a family daycare business out of their home. Their downstairs bathroom is licensed to be operated as part of the business. The toilet in that bathroom broke and couldn't flush properly. She spoke to a manager who said they would fix it immediately, but no one came. She needed it repaired promptly because the children at the daycare use the bathroom. She ended up paying an external repairperson to come fix it immediately. She has often had to pay repairpeople to fix things in her home, such as lights, due to a lack of timely response from SHA.



A tenant moved into a unit in Rainier Vista with old carpet that had not been replaced. There is mold growing in the carpet now, which exacerbates her child's asthma. She is always in the ER with her child, in and out, in a neverending cycle. "I take care of the carpet the best I can, but there are some things I just can't control with bleach."

A tenant that runs a home daycare has a consistent leak in the middle of her living room. With an overflowing bucket of water to catch the drops, mold is likely building up under the damp carpet as children play on the ground.



A tenant had a rat infestation that was repeatedly ignored by SHA. To bring the problem to SHA's doorstep, the tenant put one of the dead rats into a bag and dropped the carcass on the counter inside SHA's property management office, while demanding SHA act to address this. Tenants feel they must resort to bold measures in order to get SHA to take action, when SHA should be addressing such issues immediately.

Thirty-eight percent of tenants identified “other” issues, which is a category that includes problems such as fences, closets, cabinets, and garbage.

Many tenants also named multiple repair issues. For example, many tenants described mold growing in their homes alongside issues such as old carpet that needs to be replaced, broken kitchen cabinets, and broken appliances such as the fridge or washing machine. Additionally, many of these issues are interrelated. For example, plumbing issues may lead to structural damage, mold, and pests. SHA's records affirmed what we heard from tenants and further exposed how rampant maintenance issues are in Seattle's public housing.

"A lot of us have been living here ten years or more, but they can't even change the rugs. Dust and mites can build up." – SHA Tenant

SHA'S RECORD OF DISREPAIR

SHA inspects most of their subsidized units annually. They will make exceptions and inspect units every other year if a unit passes two consecutive inspections. They will conduct a review every three years if all adults in the households are either elderly or disabled. Looking at SHA inspections over a 21 month period (January 2022 - September 2023), SHA's staff inspectors identified over 39,744 maintenance issues in 5,379 of their public housing units of the 5,684 units inspected (i.e. 95% of the units inspected).

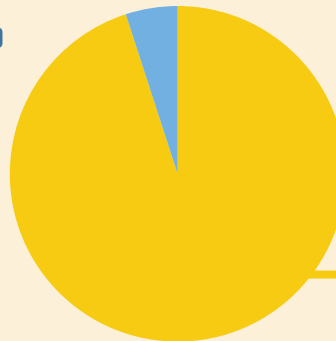
DURING JAN 2022-SEPT 2023,
SHA'S STAFF INSPECTORS IDENTIFIED

39,744

MAINTENANCE ISSUES IN

5,379

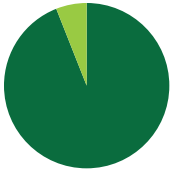
OF THEIR PUBLIC HOUSING UNITS



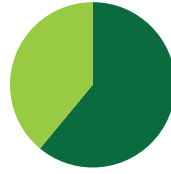
95%

OF PUBLIC
HOUSING UNITS
INSPECTED BY SHA
NEEDED REPAIRS

The most common issues identified by SHA staff during these annual inspections were lights and electrical, kitchen sink, toilet, bathtub and shower, refrigerator, and oven, as well as smoke and ventilation issues (e.g. smoke detector, carbon monoxide detector, as well as fan ventilation in kitchen, bathroom, and laundry).²⁸ Got Green invites readers to view the endnotes to learn more about our data analysis methodology.



95%
OF UNITS INSPECTED HAD
UNADDRESSED MAINTENANCE ISSUES



61%
OF INSPECTED UNITS
HAD A "HEALTH & SAFETY"
MAINTENANCE ISSUE

During these inspections, 95% of the units SHA staff inspected had unaddressed maintenance issues. Additionally, 61% of inspected units had a specific "health and safety" maintenance issue, which SHA distinguishes from "routine maintenance" issues.²⁹ In contrast to routine maintenance (which HUD deems "low deficiency"), there are varying levels of severity for health and safety deficiencies (moderate, severe, and life-threatening). SHA does not make these distinctions in their inspection reports. At minimum, moderate health and safety deficiencies present a "moderate risk of an adverse medical event requiring a healthcare visit; cause temporary harm; or if left untreated, cause or worsen a chronic condition that may have long-lasting adverse health effects; or that the physical security or safety of a resident or their property could be compromised."³⁰ These are the top repair issues documented by SHA during their inspections of 5,684 units in January 2022 - September 2023. The vast majority of households (84%) that were inspected had at least two repair issues identified by SHA staff during inspections.³¹

SHA Inspections: Most Common Issues

Category	Households with issue	% of inspected households with issue
Lights and Electrical	2,925	51.5%
Sink and Faucet	2,675	47.1%
Toilet	2,090	36.8%
Bathtub and Shower	1,927	33.9%
Refrigerator and Freezer	1,645	28.9%
Smoke Detector	1,515	26.7%
Oven and Stove	1,435	25.3%
Window	1,239	21.8%
Closet Doors	808	14.2%
Drawers and Cabinets	776	13.7%

Living with prolonged disrepair takes a significant toll on one's physical, emotional, and financial health. For example, poor indoor air quality is often caused by broken ventilation fans, as well as air leaks due to inadequately insulated windows and doors. Many issues reported by inspectors and demonstrated in open work orders are related to weatherization and keeping homes properly sealed and protected from outside elements. Looking closer at the specific repair issues identified (beyond the broad categories), SHA documented that over a third (36%) of homes that were inspected needed to address issues that required caulking.³²

Caulk is used to prevent air and water leaks from cracks, gaps, and joints to areas around showers, bathtubs, sinks, and toilets, as well as windows and doors. Homes that are not properly sealed lead to air and heat escaping. This impacts temperature regulation and air quality, and puts homes at a greater vulnerability to moisture, leaks, and flooding. This means inefficient energy usage, higher utility bills, increased likelihood of mold growth, and decreased quality of health. Additional impacts include exposure to outdoor elements, temperature, and pollution, which could contribute to asthma, respiratory illnesses, and other diseases such as heart disease.



Of the unfulfilled maintenance work orders remaining at SHA, window and door repairs are one of the most common issues. This could include windows and doors that do not close or open properly, have insufficient insulation, or have broken glass/screens/frames. Windows that are properly insulated and weatherized can protect tenants from pollutants, such as wildfire smoke (which can exacerbate conditions like asthma) and cold weather (which increases the likelihood of tenants getting sick from the cold). The delays in making repairs affect the health and well-being of tenants, particularly for populations already vulnerable to these health impacts.

THE LONELY ROAD TO REPAIRS



THE RIGHT TO REPAIRS WITHOUT DELAY

All renters in Seattle have rights and protections outlined in the City of Seattle's tenant protections and building code laws.³³ The law states that housing in Seattle must be habitable, which includes standards for plumbing, structural elements, HVAC, disability accommodations, and more.³⁴ According to SHA, "as a tenant, state law grants you the right to a livable dwelling, protection from unlawful discrimination, the right to hold the landlord liable for damage caused by the landlord's negligence"³⁵

As a landlord in the state of Washington, SHA is legally responsible for maintaining housing and promptly making repairs.³⁶ **According to the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act, landlords must begin work on repairs within the following time after receiving written notice:**



With Seattle's "Housing and Building Maintenance Code," landlords are required to abide by numerous habitability standards. Within Seattle's code is the Rental Registration and Inspection Ordinance (RRIO), which allows tenants to report code violations and unaddressed disrepair to the City of Seattle's Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI). This ordinance also protects tenants from landlord retaliation.³⁷ SDCI inspections were paused during 2020-21 due to COVID safety protocols. And despite strong renter protections (relative to other major cities), city-based enforcement does not have the resources and power it needs to fully hold landlords accountable.

A majority of the tenants we spoke to reported waiting for repairs to begin far longer than the legal limit, demonstrating that SHA is not fulfilling their legal obligations as a landlord.

The common theme we heard from tenants was that they often waited weeks to months (and in more extreme cases, years) for repairs to be made for both emergency (e.g. flooding and burst pipes) and non-emergency issues (e.g. fence repairs). It is important to note that issues that are considered "non-emergency" also impact human health and quality of life and must be addressed fully and promptly. Tenants consistently named that they went ahead and did their own repairs without a rent reduction or resources from SHA. One family ended up replacing their carpeting on their own, as water damage and mold made their living conditions unsafe. **Repeatedly, tenants shared that they had to follow up with SHA multiple times in order for their repairs to be made.**

67%

OF HOUSEHOLDS IN SEATTLE'S PUBLIC HOUSING HAVE WAITED OVER THE LEGAL MANDATE TO HAVE THEIR REPAIRS COMPLETED

WAIT TIMES FOR COMPLETED REPAIRS:

According to SHA's work order records (from January 2022 - September 2023), **tenants are waiting well beyond the legal mandate for their repairs to get completed.** Most households in Seattle's public housing have waited over 10 days for their maintenance requests to be completed (67% of households who had their work orders complete, which is 5,862 households of SHA's 8,777 units of public housing). This alone signifies the normalcy of SHA's failure to follow through on their legal responsibility to provide timely habitability repairs. Many tenants waited substantially longer: 50 days (37% households in SHA's public housing, which is 3,235 homes), 100 days (21% of units, which is 1,806 homes), and a year (5% of units, which is 477 homes).³⁸ These different wait times per household are not mutually exclusive (i.e. if a household waited a year for their repairs, they also waited 100 days, 50 days, and 10 days).

WAIT TIMES FOR UNFINISHED REPAIRS:

According to SHA's records from the past decade (January 2016 - August 2025), **38% of SHA public housing units (3,372 households) have an incomplete maintenance request.** This amounts to 6,475 incomplete work order requests (as of August 2025). In regards to wait times for incomplete work orders, tenants are waiting over 10 days (38% of all of SHA's public housing units, which is 3,372 households), 50 days (35% of units, which is 3,071 households), 100 days (32% of units, which is 2,771 households), a year (14% of units, which is 1,216 households), and over two years (2% of units, which is 202 households).³⁹ As named earlier, Got Green has calculated the total number of households that waited these varying lengths of time (i.e. all households who've waited over a year have also waited 100 days). The records disclosed by SHA do not include the number of people who reside in each of their units, if the households consist of one individual, are crowded with multiple generations under one roof, or if the unit serves as an at-home daycare where a dozen children play each day. Suffice it to say, far more people are impacted by deferred maintenance than household metrics may suggest.

WAIT TIMES FOR COMPLETED REPAIRS:

10+ DAYS 67% of SHA's units (5,862 households)

50+ DAYS 37% of units (3,235 households)

100+ DAYS 21% of units (1,806 households)

1+ YEAR 5% of units (477 households)

WAIT TIMES FOR INCOMPLETE REPAIRS:

10+ DAYS 38% of SHA's units (3,372 households)

50+ DAYS 35% of units (3,071 households)

100+ DAYS 32% of units (2,771 households)

1+ YEAR 14% of units (1,216 households)

2+ YEARS 2% of units (202 households)

The experiences tenants shared with us and the data we analyzed point to many issues with the current maintenance system. First and foremost, tenants are waiting exorbitant lengths of time for their repairs. This ranges from never having follow-up calls or visits from SHA staff after requests are submitted, to more commonly receiving an initial visit from SHA staff to see the problem with a promise to return, and then never seeing them again. **SHA's proactive approach to rent collection, alongside their maintenance neglect, viscerally communicates to tenants what SHA's priorities are.**

At the beginning of the pandemic, SHA had to adjust their repair process in order to keep staff and tenants safe. Additionally, SHA's annual inspections were paused in March–August 2020.⁴⁰ This resulted in a major repair backlog as well as staffing issues at SHA, where the limited number of maintenance staff struggled to address repair needs. With this said, **SHA records have affirmed that the early pandemic backlog is largely no longer a concern.**⁴¹ **Despite this, tenants have shared with Got Green that SHA staff continue to blame the pandemic for the delay in their repairs.** Claiming that repair neglect continues to be due to the pandemic health measures taken in 2020 insinuates that the current scale of disrepair and neglect is outside of SHA's control (i.e. the global pandemic foisted this upon them). This allows them to evade responsibility for the backlog of deferred maintenance that has amassed within more recent years.

HUD's Housing Quality Standards:

Housing that is subsidized by HUD (including public housing) must meet HUD's Housing Quality Standards, which are safety and habitability standards pertaining to structure, security, air circulation, water supply, sanitation, thermal environment, illumination, electricity, access, and emergency exits (in apartment complexes). In addition to following Seattle and WA State law and fulfilling their mission, SHA must abide by HUD's housing quality standards.

As one of the largest landlords in Seattle and the most resourced affordable housing provider in the region, SHA has an opportunity to truly fulfill their mission of “creating and sustaining decent, safe and affordable living environments that foster stability and self-sufficiency for people with low incomes” by abiding by basic tenant protections, actively committing to housing quality standards, and prioritizing repairs.⁴²

Between HUD's Housing Quality Standards, SHA's mission, and hard-won local tenant rights, protections, and standards in place, public housing in Seattle ought to be the highest quality housing, where repair requests are addressed swiftly, consistently, and comprehensively. Despite this, public housing is often uninhabitable and tenants are repeatedly forced to wait far longer than the legally-mandated timeframe for repairs.

BARRIERS TO SUBMITTING REQUESTS

Tenants also expressed how disorganized and inaccessible the current maintenance request system is. For example, tenants cannot check their expected wait time for repairs, face barriers with language access in filing requests, and experience the burden of contacting SHA multiple times to follow through. A small number of tenants shared that they only got their repairs done after submitting formal complaints to SHA's central office.

Tenants experience many barriers to submitting a repair request through SHA's maintenance request system. According to SHA, there are several ways for tenants to submit a repair request.

These include:

- **Call property management office**
 - Urgent & emergency requests during business hours
 - After-hours line
- **In-person visit to the management office**
- **Email property management office**
 - Non-urgent requests using the contact property manager form on the SHA website
- **Submit a maintenance request online through the SHA portal**
 - Tenant must register an account with the portal to submit a non-emergency maintenance request online



The rubber insulation around a tenant's refrigerator was broken, impacting their fridge's ability to keep their food cold and safe for consumption. They had to put in three requests before maintenance came to fix it.

Despite temporary relief, it became clear that SHA did not fully address the problem. The fridge would not stay shut and the tenant had to follow up multiple times. This points to the great lengths many tenants go through to get what can be perceived as simple yet consequential repairs.

At first glance, this expansive approach may appear clear, inclusive, and user-friendly. However, when tenants shared their experiences, we found that this was not the case. We consistently heard that tenants were only aware of (and would repeatedly engage in) 1-2 of the methods above with limited success, with the website portal being the least engaged. There is no clear, coherent, and consistently effective means for submitting a repair request. Additionally, SHA does not provide tenants with formal receipts and expected wait times for repair requests.

Tenants shared that the most common method they used to make repair requests was visiting the office in person, for reasons of convenience (in Rainier Vista, the office is within walking distance of units) and perceived effectiveness (they felt it was more effective to make their case face-to-face with someone to stress the urgency of their request). However, the majority of tenants said that they often had to visit the office several times about their repairs because the repairs were not made promptly and there was no follow-up communication from SHA. This poses challenges for tenants who work during the office's hours (an office that is inconsistently open) and for tenants who experience language barriers communicating with the office staff.

When asked, many tenants had not heard of SHA's online portal. Of the tenants who had heard about the portal, they reported not knowing how to use it. This shows that SHA can make significant improvements in streamlining and developing a consistent protocol for tenants to make repair requests, while accommodating different accessibility needs. In addition to language diversity, there is also diversity among SHA tenants in terms of levels of experience and comfort using digital technology.



When challenged in the courts by lawyers legally representing public housing tenants, SHA has been successful in arguing for a narrow interpretation of the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act when it comes to repair requests. Specifically, judges have affirmed that WA State law holds that repair requests are only deemed legally binding when submitted in writing in a physical form (like a letter). According to tenant lawyers, a majority of SHA's methods for logging a repair request have proven not to be legally binding under law.

This adds an additional challenge to hold SHA accountable to making repairs. Additionally, the non-legally binding methods for making a repair request are often more easily accessible for tenants due to language accessibility and convenience.

LANGUAGE JUSTICE

Seattle's public housing communities are composed of people from many backgrounds, cultures, and nations. Fifty-two languages are spoken by the households SHA serves. In addition to English, the top languages spoken by SHA tenants are Somali, Vietnamese, Amharic, Tigrinya, Cantonese, Spanish, Oromo, and Russian. SHA communicates in languages beyond English via professional interpreters, multilingual staff, translated documents, and language preference forms. As SHA is aware, language accessibility requires a multipronged approach to truly be inclusive of different needs. For example, if a tenant can't use the (automated) multilingual website due to not having access to or experience with a computer or smartphone, they aren't able to access certain information or resources. In this case, tenants would rely on different modes of communicating with SHA, such as calling or visiting the office, where they may face language barriers if there is no interpreter available to support them.

Based on conversations with tenants, many multilingual households will have the family member most proficient in English directly interface with SHA. Often, children informally interpret when calling SHA, visiting the office, and interacting with SHA staff. There are limitations to this, namely that this is a lot of responsibility for a child to hold and children are often in school during SHA's office hours. It also places the burden on the tenant to provide interpretation services that SHA should provide.

In addition to completing the backlog of unfulfilled maintenance requests and making sure future repairs are done on time, healthy public housing means a maintenance system that is clear, functional, and centers the dignity of tenants, including accessible communication across language.

CAPACITY AND PRIORITIES

In recent years, SHA has dedicated significant resources to routine maintenance, large-scale repair efforts, and a reorganization of their maintenance apparatus (e.g. the establishment of HMS, Housing Maintenance Services). According to SHA's adopted budget, HMS was projected to have a net increase of 61 maintenance jobs from 2024 to 2025.⁴³ Tenants are repeatedly told by SHA staff that they realize repairs are a problem and they are planning to take it seriously, while simultaneously claiming SHA is understaffed and underresourced. Additionally, SHA's Budget Office conducted a 2026 Budget Survey in March-April 2025, where "increasing routine maintenance" was identified as a top priority for tenants.⁴⁴ As has been discussed through this report, SHA needs to deeply prioritize rampant disrepair by allocating far more capacity to address the maintenance needs of tenants.

As this report has acknowledged, public housing needs more funding. This is made all the more dire in the midst of federal cuts to HUD, as 65.5% of SHA's funding comes from MTW Block Grants.⁴⁵ With this said, SHA is by far the largest, most powerful, and most well-funded affordable housing provider in the region. **It is within SHA's power and resources to prioritize public housing repairs by abiding by legally-mandated building code and tenant protections.**

EXCUSES FOR INACTION

Tenants expressed a mix of understanding, skepticism, and rage when sharing the common excuses they would hear from SHA about the delay in repairs: the pandemic created a backlog, there is low staffing capacity, there is a lack of funding, they will get to it eventually – the list goes on. There were also more insidious excuses: that a particular repair issue was not deemed urgent, the tenant is at fault, and it is the tenant's responsibility to take care of it. Tenants also heard rationalizations from SHA about specific repair issues: you don't need to use every burner on your stove, you can hand wash your dishes (in a case where the dishwasher broke, flooded, and mold grew inside of it), you can go to a laundromat, and just use your other bathroom (when a toilet or shower is broken, in houses with large families).

Instead of seeing inspections conducted by SHA staff as an opportunity for tenants to directly show SHA the repair issues that must be addressed, one tenant referred to SHA's annual inspection as "annual surveillance." This tenant shared that the inspection felt like SHA was less concerned with identifying habitability issues that SHA could proactively address, but instead were focused on interrogating and scolding tenants around cleanliness, guests, and lifestyle. Welfare programs in the United States too often have functioned as an opportunity for the administrative state to shame, monitor, and control the lives of poor people, especially poor women of color.⁴⁶

Lastly, tenants repeatedly expressed hopelessness and fear. After experiencing SHA's inaction for years, many tenants are resigned to expecting substandard conditions in subsidized housing. Tenants also expressed fear of what would happen to them if they vocalized any dissatisfaction to SHA. They do not want to cause waves, be blamed for disrepair, or appear ungrateful for their housing. Most tenants were on a waitlist for nearly a decade before getting accepted into public housing, and do not want to lose their housing.

"It's not living if you can't live 100%."

- SHA TENANT

FIGHT TO WIN

"If one person shows up at the office, they tell them to go home. If many of us show up, they get scared. [SHA is] watching us."

– SHA TENANT



When tenants shared their experiences with SHA's lack of prompt repairs at tenant meetings that Got Green convened, there was a shared sense of struggle and rage over the similar issues they have experienced for years. This initial spark fueled tenants to take action by organizing demonstrations at SHA's Rainier Vista office in March and November 2025. At these actions, tenants submitted their work orders in person and vocalized their frustrations with the maintenance system and how living in disrepair has affected their lives. In response to these actions, there were numerous unfulfilled commitments made by SHA to complete all the repairs.

In December 2025, Rainier Vista tenants took their case directly to senior leadership of SHA. There was a mass meeting of over fifty tenants in attendance with interpretation in English, Somali, Vietnamese, Oromo, Spanish, and Tigrinya. Tenants brought a fighting spirit as well as homemade sambusas and tea to share with their neighbors. Despite fears of SHA's retaliation, tenants bravely shared about living in unsafe and

unhealthy conditions. After being forced to hear stories, demands, and SHA's legal responsibility, SHA leadership begrudgingly conceded that disrepair is a major problem and that SHA is breaking the law by failing to fully address maintenance issues (as tenants wait weeks, months, and even years without repairs).

In response to this show of strength and solidarity, SHA staff were taken aback. SHA has hosted emergency meetings, begun to address a handful of minor repairs for some of the tenants that have been most vocal, and claimed to have added new maintenance staff positions. Tenants had never seen this level of response from SHA.

Despite this sudden increase in responsiveness from SHA, all of Rainier Vista's repairs have not yet been completed by SHA. Although some repairs were won, tenants are continuing to organize and fight to hold SHA accountable to finishing all repairs. This is just the beginning. Tenants won't stop until all public housing in Seattle is healthy public housing.

TENANTS DEMAND HEALTHY PUBLIC HOUSING



Healthy public housing means permanently public and permanently affordable homes that prioritize the health and well-being of tenants, workers, neighborhoods, and the planet.

First and foremost, public housing tenants need and deserve repairs right now. It is unacceptable that SHA has a backlog of thousands of incomplete repair requests. Additionally, SHA must transform their maintenance system to be deeply responsive and accountable to tenants. After tenants' most immediate habitability needs are addressed, SHA must weatherize and decarbonize all of their public housing — housing upgrades that will deepen tenant health, minimize future disrepair, invest in unionized green jobs, cut climate pollution, and be an inspiring model of green public housing at scale.

REPAIRS NOW!

The most glaring and urgent cause of concern in Seattle's public housing is the level of disrepair. Tenants want, need, and deserve habitable housing with consistent and comprehensive repairs. Minimal steps SHA must take include:

Complete the Repair Backlog: SHA must complete all open maintenance work orders right now! SHA must prioritize and fully complete all unfulfilled maintenance work orders. Ranging from issues with electrical, plumbing, and heat to broken appliances and various unsafe and unhealthy conditions, public housing tenants deserve healthy living conditions.

Maintenance System With Dignity & Without Delay: SHA must guarantee swift and comprehensive repairs and steward a maintenance system that is accessible, consistent, and communicative. Components of a future maintenance system include: repairs without delay, respect and fair treatment, accessibility, language justice, worker justice, and accountability.

REPAIRS WITHOUT DELAY:

SHA must demonstrate an active commitment to timely and comprehensive repairs. Every hour without repairs is a threat to tenant health, safety, comfort, and dignity.

At minimum, SHA must follow the timeline set by law for all repairs moving forward.

Electricity, water, & heat
in the winter: 24 hrs

Appliances & plumbing: 72 hrs

Other repairs: 10 days



Respect: Tenants deserve to be treated with respect and dignity by SHA, not ignored, minimized, or scoffed at. SHA bosses must provide SHA workers with the support, resources, and training to be fully responsive to and caring toward the needs of tenants.

Accessibility: SHA's maintenance system must be accessible, consistent, easy to use, and accommodating of different levels of technological literacy. This must include clear communication, documentation, and transparency.

Language Justice: Language justice must be expanded at SHA, where tenants will receive information from and communicate with SHA in their primary language without facing barriers.

Stability: Major code violations that require significant work may require tenants to temporarily vacate their units. In this situation, SHA must strengthen their commitment to provide temporary and reasonable accommodations for tenants and expedite repairs that require absence of tenants to minimize time away from one's home and neighborhood.



PERMANENTLY PUBLIC AND PERMANENTLY FUNDED:

SHA cannot rely on the selling of public land and housing to the predatory real estate market as a means of securing funds to pay for maintenance upgrades. The privatization of public housing will continue to uproot tenants and cede land to the speculative market. The fight for healthy public housing means that public housing must be defended, improved, and expanded, both on a local and national level. Public housing must be well funded and provided with the resources it needs, which means that HUD programs and funding must be protected, rather than being severely cut.

THE ROLE OF CITY, COUNTY, AND STATE GOVERNMENTS:

Local governments through the City of Seattle, King County, and WA State must use their powers to not only hold Seattle Housing Authority accountable to legally mandated housing quality standards, but must also steadfastly defend public housing as a beacon of the public sector. City, County, and State government can take numerous actions to further prioritize the health and well-being of public housing tenants: defense and expansion of renter protections (e.g. there currently are not any strong housing quality protections against mold); stronger enforcement of housing quality standards to hold SHA and other major public and private landlords accountable; allocating significant public funds toward public housing repairs and retrofits (via new progressive revenue); and a Whole-Home Repairs Program, similar to other parts of the nation, that can fully tackle housing disrepair, weatherization, and decarbonization at scale.⁴⁷



Worker Justice:

Maintenance workers deserve fair working conditions, fair wages, and fair union contracts. SHA must be committed to working with the numerous unions that represent workers at SHA. Repairs must benefit tenants, workers, and the larger community.

Accountability and Power:

Public housing tenants must have collective bargaining power in relation to SHA. At minimum, public housing tenants must have formal recourse to hold SHA accountable in regards to disrepair issues and the maintenance system process.

HEALTHY HOUSING, HEALTHY PLANET

Got Green believes that our housing is deeply connected to the climate and environment. Weatherization, energy efficiency, and renewable energy retrofits are vital for a long-haul vision of healthy public housing. However, the most immediate issues affecting tenant health and well-being must be addressed first. As Climate and Community Institute's Ruthy Gourevitch states, "strapping a heat pump to a building filled with mold will not deliver the material health and climate improvements that tenants need to live safely."⁴⁸

The current issues of disrepair and the immediate harm to tenant dignity, health, and safety must be addressed as a precondition. After Seattle's public housing receives the baseline repairs tenants need and deserve, SHA must fully weatherize and decarbonize their housing stock.

CARBON FOOTPRINT OF SHA'S PUBLIC HOUSING



6,175
metric tonnes
of climate pollution

According to the City of Seattle, "buildings are responsible for 40% of Seattle's climate pollution — the majority of which comes from burning fossil fuels for space and water heating." Between October 2022-September 2023, SHA's public housing contributed 6,175 metric tonnes of climate pollution, which is 1.2% of Seattle's climate pollution from residential buildings.⁴⁹ SHA directly shared this information to Got Green via a public records request — the data was sourced from Seattle City Light and Puget Sound Energy, made possible by the City of Seattle's Building Emissions Performance Standard (BEPS).



15,726,495
Miles driven by
an average gas-
powered car

With the data available, SHA's carbon footprint is the equivalent of 15,726,495 miles driven by an average gas-powered car.⁵⁰

Within the last decade, SHA has collected data, written reports, and made a small number of hires to advance their Sustainability Agenda, which looks at the environmental and health impacts of their work (e.g. the carbon footprint of their housing, the emissions of their vehicle fleet, and their gardens and greenery). This has included actively pursuing energy efficiency, decarbonization, and weatherization.

Below, we describe the connections between climate and housing, recommendations to make housing healthier for people and the planet, and case studies from SHA that could be brought to scale across their properties.

Free From Fossil Fuels: Too often our housing is powered by pollution, meaning that fossil fuels heat and power our homes and appliances, resulting in increased greenhouse gas emissions that worsen climate change. In our local context, SHA's public housing stock is powered by energy supplied by both Seattle City Light (SCL) and Puget Sound Energy (PSE). SCL is Seattle's public utility and primarily provides hydroelectric power. There are numerous problems with hydroelectricity — from producing methane emissions, to devastating essential species like salmon, to eroding indigenous sovereignty. While acknowledging the harms of hydroelectricity, its climate impact is vastly smaller than that caused by buildings powered by natural gas.

PSE is a privatized utility company and primarily provides natural gas to the broader region. In addition to trading away our planet and our futures to make money, PSE's operations are very harmful at points of extraction (fracking), transportation (pipelines), and processing. Indigenous communities have powerfully led opposition at each stage.⁵¹ Baseline decarbonization for SHA would be to fully move their housing stock off of fossil fuels. It would benefit tenant health and reduce climate pollution if SHA removed gas-powered heaters and ranges, and sweepingly upgraded public housing units with energy-efficient green appliances and HVAC systems.

In 2021, SHA's Bayview Tower (with 100 units of public housing for seniors in Seattle's Belltown neighborhood) had a heat pump water heating system installed.

\$600,000

TOTAL COST

\$350,000

PAID FOR BY CITY OF SEATTLE'S OFFICE OF HOUSING

Installation took place in an afternoon and had minimal disruption for residents.⁵²

SHA embracing energy efficient and decarbonized HVAC technology is a welcome development. However, there does not appear to be current plans to bring heat pumps to scale across SHA.

CLEAN AIR AS RESPITE FROM HEAT AND SMOKE:

In 2020, 78 people died from the heat and 200 died due to smoke in Washington State.⁵³ Living in units of disrepair makes one even more vulnerable to heat and smoke. Routine maintenance must be thorough and diligent in regards to habitability, insulation, and weatherization, to protect tenants' health as the climate crisis becomes more severe. Additionally, only about half of Seattle homes have air conditioning. By and large, public housing units in Seattle do not have air conditioning.



Between 2003-2006, SHA constructed sixty Breathe Easy homes in the High Point public housing community in West Seattle. Each home had a high standard of weatherization and health-conscious construction aimed at reducing asthma triggers.



Through a study conducted by University of Washington and Public Health – Seattle and King County, tenants saw significant health improvements:

63%

MORE SYMPTOM-FREE DAYS

66%

REDUCTION IN URGENT CARE VISITS

With reduced asthma symptoms and triggers, quality of life improved (fewer sleepless nights, less lost work and school time, and lower medical bills).⁵⁴

SHA's Yesler Terrace redevelopment resulted in 57 new Breathe Easy housing units. There do not appear to be current plans to bring Breathe Easy standards to scale across the entirety of SHA's public housing, although it could greatly benefit tenant health.

Homes That Prioritize Tenant Health, Not Profits:

Gas in our homes is directly harmful to our respiratory health and can be dangerous (e.g. gas leaks that lead to explosions). With landlord neglect and a lack of commitment to weatherization, tenants are forced to live with disrepair, energy inefficiency, and higher utility bills. To cut costs, developers will build with low-quality materials and improperly insulate homes. As a result, tenants are exposed to moisture, mold, heat, cold, smoke, and other threats to our health and safety. Decarbonization, weatherization, insulation, upgrades to energy efficient appliances, and removal of toxins will protect the health of tenants and the planet.



ROOTED IN PLACE, NOT DISPLACED:

Environmentally conscious urban planning, green construction, and other neighborhood “beautification” efforts often (intentionally or not) manifest as green gentrification. Most green development moves in step with the real estate industry’s primary objective of profit accumulation. Without aggressive safeguards and thoughtful planning, efforts such as transit-oriented development, major green construction, and high-density upzoning can dramatically alter the composition of neighborhoods. This occurs through an influx of new wealthy residents, increases in property values and rents, and the displacement of working-class Black and Brown communities. As environmental and health improvements are made to public housing, it is important that public housing be well funded, remain permanently affordable, and not sold off to private developers so that tenants are rooted in place rather than displaced.



Climate Justice in the Face of Climate Migration:

Seattle has experienced numerous climate impacts in recent years. Seattle can expect the increasing severity of extreme heat, flooding, and sea level rise, with South Seattle and the Duwamish Valley being most vulnerable and severely impacted. However, the entirety of our city is not anticipated to be underwater or engulfed in flames in the near future, unlike many other major American cities and pockets of Washington State.⁵⁵ Due to this reality, experts anticipate that there will be significant climate migration into Seattle in the coming years.⁵⁶ Without transformative political action, climate change will exacerbate existing injustices by solidifying our city as a playground for the wealthy, especially as our tax code remains one of the most regressive in the nation. But it does not have to be this way. By redistributing resources (e.g. by taxing the rich), strengthening tenant protections, expanding permanently public and deeply affordable healthy housing, and solidifying a stable, well-resourced social safety net that centers the well-being of people and the planet, Seattle can become a sanctuary of care, connection, and resilience during the storms ahead.

PUBLIC HOUSING TO WEATHER THE STORM

Got Green situates the fight for healthy public housing in a bigger vision of green housing justice. We believe that we can green our housing by taking power away from profiteers and polluters, bolstering tenant power, and making sure housing is stable, healthy, and permanently affordable for all. Public housing must be defended, improved, and expanded to make this vision a reality.

After Seattle's public housing receives the baseline repairs tenants need and deserve, SHA must fully weatherize and decarbonize their housing stock. Weatherization may include: energy and environmental audits, insulation (of roof, walls, floors, ducts, and pipes), air and water sealing, energy-efficient appliances (fridge, range, laundry, dishwasher), window and door upgrades, ventilation improvements, and removal of toxins (mold and lead). At minimum, decarbonizing is unhooking gas and fully electrifying all units with heat pumps. Thorough energy retrofits will provide healthier living conditions for tenants, insulate homes, and cut climate pollution. In the future, Got Green plans to continue our organizing work with public housing tenants and share a more comprehensive account of weatherization and decarbonization.

By adopting and implementing these recommendations, SHA will stand as a champion of healthy housing, demonstrating their leadership and paving the way for public housing authorities in other parts of the nation to also make these bold changes.



CONCLUSION



Public housing tenants in South Seattle are moving from resigned hopelessness to collective power. Fed up with disrepair and disrespect, tenants are talking to their neighbors, getting organized, and fighting for the housing they deserve.

The fight for healthy public housing in Seattle has been inspired by Got Green's own history of weatherization, national visions of green public housing, and the courage and power of tenants who have fought and continue to fight for homes, health, and dignity.

Our community will continue to experience many storms — floods, heatwaves, wildfires, and displacement, as well as the many political and economic crises on the horizon. We all deserve public housing that will weather the storms ahead.

"We have power as tenants. We need to use that power to make things better for all of us."

- SHA TENANT

APPRECIATIONS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by Got Green and inspired by the hundreds of door-to-door conversations we have had with public housing tenants in South Seattle. Got Green would like to thank the hundreds of tenants who have shared their stories with us and invited us into their homes. We acknowledge how vulnerable and trusting this is, as public housing tenants increasingly live with fear and the threat of harassment, eviction, and state violence. Got Green's commitment to the fight for healthy public housing has been shaped by an initial issue identification survey of South Seattle residents as well as informational interviews about our local political landscape with friends and colleagues from various social movement sectors, such as housing, climate, racial justice, policy and research, labor unions, and more. Thank you to our neighbors and friends who have been in conversation with us. This current work builds off of our organizational history of fighting for housing, weatherization, jobs, and challenging displacement. Much gratitude to former staff, members, and leaders of Got Green. In particular, we'd like to thank Marion Romero, who recently transitioned off staff and played a central role in advancing our tenant organizing work.

Got Green has a debt of gratitude to the work of the King County Housing Advocacy Collaboration (KCHAC), a formation that includes the Tenant Law Center, the NW Justice Project, Be:Seattle, Tenant Organizers and Advocates (TOA), Eastside Legal Assistance Program (ELAP), and the Tenants Union of WA, who have shared their resources and expertise. Member organizations in the KCHAC have been engaged in numerous efforts to support SHA tenants by filing lawsuits, holding listening sessions, and investigating living conditions at various housing authorities. Additionally, Got Green is grateful to be in conversation with friends in the labor movement, who are building worker power and supporting us in thinking through worker-tenant solidarity in the fight for healthy public housing. We are especially grateful for the ongoing strategic conversations with our friends from Puget Sound Sage, 350 Seattle, Be: Seattle, and leaders of Got Green.

This report was researched, written, and edited by Got Green's staff. The primary writers are Got Green's Emily Chan and Sean O'Neill. In addition to internal review, we invited our friends to share their reflections, feedback, and edits on earlier drafts. Thank you to Debolina Banerjee, Howard Greenwich, Matthew Hitchman, and Shemona Moreno for reading our report and helping us sharpen it. Additionally, thank you to Alice Lockhart and Kim Yu for reviewing our data analysis and providing feedback. Thank you to Ana Von Huben for illustrations, graphics, data visuals, and overall report design.

Got Green is inspired by the grassroots visions of housing and climate justice put forward by local and national forces. Additionally, the title of this report is inspired by It Takes Roots To Weather The Storm — an alliance of alliances (including Grassroots Global Justice, Climate Justice Alliance, Right to the City, Indigenous Environmental Network).

Lastly, the key findings found in this report were made possible due to the time and efforts of workers at Seattle Housing Authority, who were very helpful in the public disclosure request process. Got Green is grateful for all public housing workers, who work tirelessly for a future of healthy public housing that benefits tenants, workers, and the wider community. With tenants, workers, and community united, public housing will be defended, repaired, and expanded.

APPENDIX

As the report focuses on public housing in Seattle, this appendix provides further exploration of history, themes, and concepts that were only lightly discussed (if at all) in the report.

Racism, Disinvestment, and Real Estate: While stamping out the civil right movement and rolling back FDR’s New Deal and LBJ’s Great Society programs, political and economic leadership stewarded the organized abandonment of working-class Black and Brown communities (i.e. systematic disinvestment, neglect, and degradation).⁵⁷ This laid the groundwork for how public housing communities would be depicted by the powers-that-be for decades: dehumanizing and racist caricatures that claim public housing communities are irredeemably filled with drugs, crime, familial dysfunction, shiftlessness, and decay.⁵⁸

This living history is situated in major shifts in late 20th century political economy: factories in the United States closed and were relocated to places with lower wages and less labor and environmental protections, which led to rampant unemployment. Deindustrialization coincided with the United States building the largest military, police, and prison apparatus in world history; conquering new markets abroad while capturing and containing people deemed disposable at home. Meanwhile, funding for public goods and services was severely cut (education, housing, healthcare, food, and more) and the non-profit sector expanded, an attempt to offset the shortcomings of a gutted public sector social safety net, creating a patchwork of underfunded, non-unionized, non-public service provision.⁵⁹

With the flight of manufacturing capital, urban landscapes were taken over by the finance, insurance, and real estate sectors. Currently, 61% of the world’s assets are invested in real estate, and Seattle is no exception.⁶⁰ In this context, we are falsely led to believe public housing is a failure and the private real estate market is the solution (as actualized in policies like HOPE VI and the Faircloth Amendment). As touched on in this report, the disrepair of public housing takes place in a broader context of dwindling funds for public housing, the demolition of public housing units, and the privatization of publicly owned land by the private real estate industry. Market evangelists claim public housing is uniquely odious, relative to the privatized housing rental market. This narrative fails to acknowledge the all-out assault on public housing as well as the pervasive horrors of being forced to live in housing owned by private slumlords (from behemoths like Blackstone to small-scale private landlords).

Renting in Seattle: As discussed earlier in the report, a majority of Seattle residents are renters. A very small fraction of renters in Seattle reside in public housing. The vast majority of renters in Seattle reside in market-rate and privately-owned housing (i.e. housing primarily controlled by corporate landlords and major financial institutions as well as by so-called “mom and pop” landlords).⁶¹ The rent is too high in large part because private landlords control the vast majority of the rental market. Private landlords will charge as much rent that they can get away with, will take any opportunity to tack on fees, fines, and deposits, and will work tirelessly to water down and defeat any attempts at rent control and any efforts to limit the ways landlords extract money from tenants (e.g. Got Green supports the work of our friends fighting to get rid of junk fees and ban RUBS — ratio utility billing system). Private landlords often intentionally skimp on repairs to pocket a higher percentage of the rent we pay them.⁶² Landlords displace and (informally) evict tenants with numerous tools: rent increases, failure to renew leases,

harassment via unscheduled visits, repair neglect, renoventions (i.e. renovations that force tenants to move out), changing locks, removing belongings, cutting power, and retaliation when tenants vocalize grievances. Ultimately, landlords are able to deploy the courts and cops to formally evict tenants with power to fine, harass, forcibly remove, and arrest.

Although there are laws on the books to protect tenants from some of this, tenant protections and enforcement are far from what is needed. Additionally, landlords are hellbent on rolling back existing tenant protections. Compared to private landlords, public housing authorities are not only mandated by law, but also by HUD and their mission to prioritize affordability, habitability, and tenant stability. As outlined in this report, this mandate does not reflect current reality. Without profound interventions, the finance sector, real estate industry, and the landlord lobby will continue their control of the housing system and will remain an active threat to public housing and the well-being of all tenants. The transformation of public housing in Seattle will not in-and-of-itself solve the multifaceted housing crisis: unpayable rents, displacement, homelessness, unhealthy housing conditions, and real estate profiteering. For this reason, Got Green extends our solidarity to the many efforts to build tenant power, fight for housing justice, and win a city and a world where all of us have the housing, food, work, and care we need to thrive.

Social Housing in Seattle: Got Green firmly believes in a vision of permanently public and deeply affordable healthy housing, where non-market housing will overshadow a privatized real estate market. Existing public housing must be defended, repaired, and retrofitted with the power and dignity of tenants at the center.⁶³ With national caps to the number of public housing units (due to the Clinton-era Faircloth Amendment, which must be repealed), social housing is one important path to expanding the housing we need: housing that is government-owned, permanently public, healthy and climate resilient, deeply affordable across class, and nourishes tenant democracy. Got Green strongly supports Seattle's struggle for social housing and is inspired by the work of our friends at House Our Neighbors, who have stewarded this work locally.

Green New Deal for Public Housing: Currently, there are national efforts to achieve a Green New Deal for Public Housing, which would provide billions of public dollars to repair, weatherize, and decarbonize all of the nation's public housing. A Green New Deal for Public Housing has been proposed in the policy championed by Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Sanders, informed by the work of the Community & Climate Initiative, who "estimate that decarbonizing the public housing stock would yield 5.67 million metric tonnes of CO₂, the equivalent of taking 1.26 million cars off the road." Our analysis and local efforts in Seattle are inspired by this national vision.⁶⁴ Got Green co-led the launch of Seattle's Green New Deal (GND), a localized effort inspired by the national GND momentum and decades-long work of fighting for a just transition. Seattle's GND envisions ending climate pollution in Seattle, addressing historic economic and racial injustices, creating thousands of unionized green jobs, and providing investment into building a climate resilient city (including housing). Got Green's work of fighting for healthy public housing in Seattle builds off of and is inspired by these efforts.

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