

## **Local Housing Survey Finds Conditions Poor; 'International Corridor' Residents Call for Action**

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**Byline:** Nurith C. Aizenman, Washington Post Staff Writer

### **Body**

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A recently released study of housing conditions in the largely immigrant "international corridor" spanning Langley Park in Prince George's County and Silver Spring and Takoma Park in Montgomery paints a bleak picture. About 40 percent of renters surveyed had peeling paint in their homes, a possible lead paint hazard. About 48 percent complained of rodent or insect infestations. Almost 20 percent said they were without heat at least once during the winter.

Yet the study's authors say the report, which was commissioned by Montgomery County and released last week, also comes with a silver lining: Many of the 18 local residents hired to conduct the survey were so disturbed by what they saw that they have since become community activists.

So it is that Jaime Velazquez, a 54-year-old Colombian construction worker who lived in Silver Spring when he was hired to do the survey but has since moved to Langley Park in Prince George's, now routinely hands out fliers advertising events held by the immigrant advocacy group CASA de Maryland. The organization conducted the study in conjunction with researchers from the University of Maryland.

Similarly, Maria Carolina Guzman, a 34-year-old former teacher from El Salvador, was motivated to volunteer at her daughter's school, Rolling Terrace Elementary School in Takoma Park. Another Salvadoran, Sandra Herrera, 34, of Silver Spring has joined a neighborhood group promoting pedestrian safety in the corridor.

Then there is Alexander Valencia-Reyes, 32, a part-time student who was prompted not only to organize a tenants association in his apartment complex in Silver Spring, but also to take a job with CASA's housing program helping to form similar groups in other buildings. CASA's work extends frequently between Montgomery and Prince George's, so there is likely to be a ripple effect in both counties.

"I definitely don't think I would have gotten so involved [in the community] if it hadn't been for doing the survey," Valencia-Reyes said.

"It really made me think about trying to solve all these problems."

This side effect was not exactly accidental, said Maria Elva Maldonado, co-organizer of the study and director of the housing program at CASA.

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To be sure, she said, the primary reason for the study -- which was sponsored by Montgomery County at CASA's urging -- was to establish a baseline of current housing conditions in the corridor. After CASA and the county make hoped-for efforts to improve the situation, they plan to conduct a new survey and assess their success.

To that end, the researchers selected a portion of the international corridor considered representative of the whole -- a series of neighborhoods, known as Long Branch, clustered around University Boulevard and Piney Branch Road in Montgomery County on the border with Prince George's -- and sent the survey teams door-to-door over a seven week period in summer 2002.

Now that the data have been processed and analyzed, Montgomery officials said, they are looking at how they might strengthen code enforcement in the area. Most notably, county officials are contacting all of the roughly 175 rental properties in Long Branch that fall under their jurisdiction. The reasons for doing this are to determine whether owners of properties built before 1950 have complied with state laws requiring them to reduce the lead paint hazard in their buildings, and to offer to pay half the cost of testing such buildings for lead paint.

Apart from the study's main purpose, Maldonado said, "We also saw this as a real opportunity to offer people organizational training on how to gain the confidence of their communities and then follow through." Maldonado said that she made a point of choosing surveyors who not only possessed good communication skills and knowledge of the neighborhood, but who seemed likely to treat their assignment as more than just a job.

"It wasn't a question on the application, but I was really interested in finding folks who volunteered that they really saw this as a chance to work with their community," she said.

In exchange, the surveyors who went door-to-door through their assigned neighborhoods for about 12 to 15 hours per week while conducting the survey, were paid \$ 15 per hour.

Despite the temporary nature of the job, more than 150 people applied, Maldonado said. Many of those selected were highly educated in their home countries but hold low-paying jobs in the United States because of their limited English. For instance, Velasquez, the construction worker, was an agricultural engineer in Colombia. Herrera's most recent job was as a cafeteria cashier in College Park even though she has a bachelor's degree in business administration from a university in El Salvador.

They conducted the interviews with Spanish-speaking residents -- who make up the majority of the residents in the area -- while English-speaking partners interviewed non-Latinos.

The system proved effective: About 40 percent of the 809 household heads contacted by the surveyors agreed to answer the survey, which resembled the long-form questionnaire of the Census and took 30 to 40 minutes to complete.

Before beginning the study, the surveyors were given a two-week training course. Much of it focused on teaching them to enter the results of the survey into specially programmed hand-held computers. But many said they also came away with skills that have come in handy during their subsequent community organizing.

"We got a lot of tips on what to do if someone doesn't want to talk to you. I learned how to introduce myself and not feel shy, and to not feel bad if someone rejects you," Valencia-Reyes said. "I also learned how important it is to really listen to what people in the community are saying to you about their problems."

Because the surveyors were residents of Long Branch, most were already at least somewhat aware of the area's housing problems. Indeed, Guzman complained, drunks routinely sleep in the stairwell of her building because there is no lock on the front door. She added, "My floor is in terrible shape, and you have to be really careful about leaving food out even for a moment because of all the cockroaches."

Nonetheless, many surveyors said they were shocked at the living conditions they encountered -- and by the difficulty many residents reported in getting building managers to fix problems.

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"In one apartment there was a huge hole under the kitchen sink, and you could see the roaches and mouse droppings," Valencia-Reyes said. "In other buildings there was trash everywhere and the smell of human waste. . . . It was really nasty and it made me really sad and angry, because it seems like the management companies . . . didn't care how people were living."

As much as she shared the surveyors' concerns, Maldonado said she took hope in watching it spur them to greater activism. "After they'd come back [to CASA's office] from doing the surveys, they'd stay late into the night talking about the people they'd met and the questions they had about how to help them. It was amazing to watch." Even though by this point they were off the clock, "we couldn't get rid of them," Maldonado said with a laugh. "They were just so enthusiastic."

Now, Maldonado hopes that similar surveys will be launched in other communities. "It really gets past the frustrations people have in dealing with government, and shows them a different and powerful way of making their voice heard."

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