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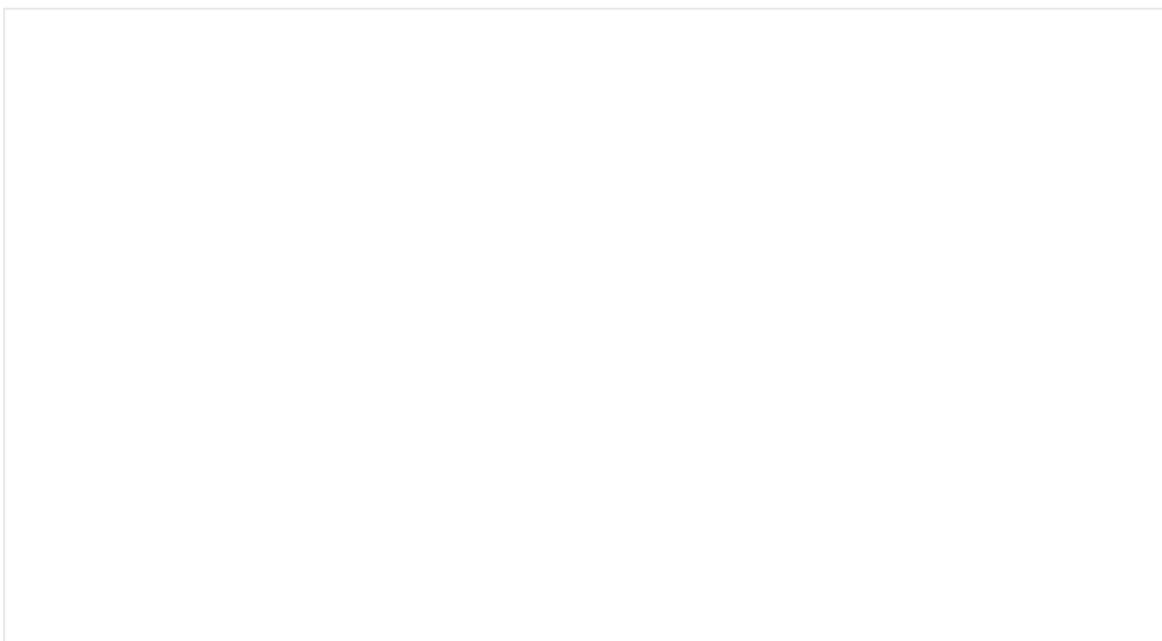


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## Journalists Revisit Deadly DeKalb Fire, Reignite Housing Discussion

🕒 April 24, 2012 (<https://www.norwoodnews.org/id=7401&story=journalists-revisit-deadly-dekalb-fire-reignite-housing-debate/>)

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(<https://i2.wp.com/www.norwoodnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Housing-Panel.jpg>)

A panel discussion at Manhattan College on April 23 addressed the issues of housing safety and landlord accountability. (photo by Jeanmarie Evelly)

A decade after an electrical fire at 3569 DeKalb Ave. claimed the life of an 8-year-old Bronx boy, journalists and housing activists are still trying to find answers to the questions posed in the wake of his death—namely, how the city should enforce housing code violations and hold landlords accountable for conditions that put tenants at risk.

That was the topic of a panel discussion held at Manhattan College last night, organized by the school's Urban Affairs department, *City Limits* magazine and Jordan Moss, a former *Norwood News* editor. The event arose from an investigation into landlord practices and regulations that was published in *City Limits* last month (<http://www.citylimits.org/magazine/308/march-april-2012>), a series of stories written by Moss, journalist Tom Robbins and a team of students at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism which focused on wealthy real estate operative Frank Palazzolo, who has been tied to dozens of dilapidated Bronx buildings over the years—including 3569 DeKalb Ave., where young Jashawn Parker was killed in 2002.

Moss covered the fire for the *Norwood News* at the time (to read some of that original coverage, see here

(<http://www.bronxmall.com/norwoodnews/past/081502/news/page1.html>) and here (<http://www.bronxmall.com/norwoodnews/past/120502/news/page2.html>)) and was shocked that no one was ever held accountable for the blaze, despite the fact that the

building had hundreds of housing code violations. When the *Norwood News* began looking at other buildings linked to Palazzolo at the time, it found about a hundred Bronx properties with some 19,000 violations among them. In another of his buildings, a 7-year-old boy suffered brain damage from lead paint.

“Landlords like this somehow never see the inside of a criminal court,” Moss said. “Apartments shouldn’t make people sick, or scared.”

The issue of substandard housing has come up again and again in the Bronx, making headlines in recent years with incidents like the Milbank (<https://www.norwoodnews.org/id=3075&story=city-steps-in-demands-repairs-at-milbank-buildings/>) or Ocelet buildings (<http://brie.hunter.cuny.edu/hpe/?p=982>), where developers looking to turn a profit paid too much for properties they couldn’t afford, or didn’t know how, to properly manage.

“It’s pretty easy, if you don’t know what you’re doing, to run a crappy building,” said Gregory Lobo Jost, of the University Neighborhood Housing Program, who spoke at last night’s event. The panel of experts tackled the topic of how the city should deal with bad landlords, and whether or not current tactics are working to keep tenants safe.

Harold Shultz, a former official with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) who now works for the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, said the problem is not with housing laws, but with how they are enforced—through housing court. The system is so cumbersome and overburdened with cases, he said, that most housing violations are never brought before a judge, and the majority of landlords don’t actually face penalties for breaking the rules.

“You have a system in which the vast bulk of landlords believe, correctly, that there is a very low chance of having to pay a fine, that there really is no one looking over their shoulder making sure they’re doing the right thing,” he said.

Journalist Tom Robbins, who led the *City Limits* investigation and who covered housing for years for the *Village Voice*, agreed.

“It’s a pretty useless mechanism, in terms of getting housing justice,” he said, of the court system. “It’s where good cases go to die.”

The city has tried other tactics in recent years, like HPD’s Alternative Enforcement Program, (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/hpd/html/pr2007/pr-11-21-07.shtml>) which cuts through some of the bureaucratic red tape by allowing the agency to go ahead and make emergency repairs on the most distressed buildings, then billing the landlord for the work. But the program only targets the worst property owners, and some housing advocates say there needs to be a more comprehensive way to monitor the rest.

“Is there a way that the city can have more control?” asked Kerri White, a tenant organizer with the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB).

One idea is to require landlords be licensed before they 're able to purchase new properties, which White says could help the city track which owners are buying up distressed buildings, or who has a bad track record when it comes to repairing violations. But Shultz said he was skeptical.

“Isn’t the real issue: is the building being managed well?” he said. “If the building is not well-managed, they should go after you, whether or not you have a permit.”

Bronx property owner Sandra Erickson was the one member of the panel representing the landlord’s perspective. While bad landlords do exist, she told the crowd, the majority of property owners maintain their buildings, and any reforms to the city’s housing laws should keep them in mind.

“We do provide a very important service in the city of New York,” she said. “I think it’s important that you don’t hurt the good landlords, overly burdening the ones that are doing the right thing.”

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