

# Anatomy of an eviction

*20 residents of Bellows Falls seek new homes after an emergency health order condemns an apartment building. How did this happen?*

**By: Allison Teague, *The Commons***

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BELLOWS FALLS—Over the last two years, the Rockingham Selectboard and the Bellows Falls Village Trustees have been grappling with unsafe housing issues in the village, trying to address them through fire and safety codes.

In some cases, aging housing stock built during the boomtown days in the late 19th and early 20th centuries of this former mill town has not been properly maintained.

The problem has been made worse by absentee landlords who have been unable to maintain these older buildings.

Caught in the middle, between municipal authorities trying to enforce building codes and landlords who say they can't afford to maintain their properties, are the tenants, many of whom are having trouble finding safe and affordable places to live.

For the 20 people who lived on 42 Green St. who lost their apartments last week when the town issued an Emergency Health Order that forced their eviction, the future is uncertain.

How did this eviction happen, an eviction that tenants say they received no warning of until a couple of weeks ago?

According to the property manager, Jim Elsesser of Alstead, N.H., the three-story building that houses three 3-bedroom apartments is owned by Veronica and Scott Cooper of Pinecliffe Holdings LLC of Plymouth, Mass., and Golden, Colo.

According to Elsesser, the landlords told him they needed the rent from all the tenants to make their mortgage on the building.

When, according to Elsesser, one of the tenants stopped paying rent in January of this year, it made it impossible for the owners to comply with and repair the health and safety violations found by Town Health Officer Ellen Howard.

“Ellen sent numerous certified letters notifying them [the landlords] of this health hazard at least six months ago,” said Rockingham Municipal Manager Tim Cullenen. “She never got a reply.”

The town found that the porch on the structure was “unsafe as the main entry way to the building for tenants and the post office mail carrier.”

After receiving no response from the Coopers, an Emergency Health Order was issued Aug. 8, with an eviction notice to tenants to vacate the premises on Aug. 23.

While Cullenen said the tenants “had plenty of time to find another place to live,” referring to the six-month process of trying to locate and deal with the landlords, it is not clear that the tenants were ever told directly that the process would result in their needing to find another place to live.

Both the town and the village have been cracking down on buildings for fire safety, health hazards, or unsafe building violations as well as being “derelict,” with a property on 69 Atkinson St. notified of an unsafe building ordinance violation earlier this year.

Cullenen laid blame for the evictions at the feet of the tenants for “full dumpsters,” then with a landlord “we can’t find.”

“The first I heard about [the eviction] was two weeks ago,” said third-floor tenant Crystal Long.

Long, who has been keeping up on her rent, said she was getting some money at the beginning of the month, but “not enough” for first month, last month and a deposit.

She has one child younger than 18 who will be going to a motel “for a few nights” with her. Her other son, who just turned 18, will be “couch surfing” with friends, taking the family dog with him, a separation which visibly upset Long’s youngest when the time came for good-byes as the family split up on Green Street on August 23.

Lisa Pitcher of Our Place Drop In Center noted that in Vermont's tight housing market "even if I had six months to find a place to live, I would have a hard time finding one. And I would have the money. These people cannot afford to rehouse themselves."

Vermont ranks 13th highest among rents in the nation, and in Windham County with a population of 44,513, an estimated 5,476, or 12.3 percent, live below the poverty line. Statewide, 11.1 percent of Vermonters live in poverty, while nationally, the rate is 13.8 percent.

"Many more are struggling to meet their needs even with one or two incomes in the household," Southeastern Vermont Community Action (SEVCA) Planning and Development Director Lisa F. Bloch explained.

Pitcher said one tenant told her that Howard said to "go to the Springfield Housing Authority, where she was under the impression she would be able to find housing. They told her to come back when she was evicted."

Additionally, splitting up families can be traumatic for the youngest members, creating a scar, Pitcher said, "they can carry for a lifetime. Uprooting young kids is never a good idea."

When tenants were asked an hour before their eviction if they had been in touch with SEVCA, the reply was "yes, but they couldn't really help us."

"They had plenty of notice...almost two and a half weeks" said Cullenen last week, when asked whether the tenants had been able to find alternative housing. "It's not in the municipal jurisdiction" to coordinate agencies for housing, he explained.

"We hope that the agencies that deal with that stuff, the interfaith groups, housing agencies who help people like that, step up" to help, he said.

Asked whether or not the town service officer had been contacted to help find them housing, he said he had received an email from Ann DiBernardo that as of Aug. 22, "no one had."

Pitcher said that all the housing vouchers have been given out. "There aren't any more," she said.

That's mostly as a result of Tropical Storm Irene and the people who needed housing because they had lost their homes.

Directly across the street, Pat and Alan Fowler's well maintained yellow home overlooks 46 Green St.

Elsesser said "all the neighbors are really nice." But why the neighborhood did not come together as it did for victims of Tropical Storm Irene to help the 20 people who became homeless last week is something of a mystery.

Elsesser sees the building as one of the village's grand old houses. He says the house is not run down on the inside, and removing the porch would have been simple, and "under \$5,000."

Dreaming, he said, "I'd love to see a homeowners association come together and buy the building, renovate and refurbish it, and then run the building with rules. And when someone breaks the rules, then there are consequences," Elsesser suggested.

But the reality last Thursday afternoon, as the tenants of 42 Green St. scattered, clutching what belongings they could carry with them, is that victims of natural disasters are not seen in the same light as those whose landlord failed to fix health code violations. Children, pets, and parents are expected to fend for themselves.

"It's sad and just plain embarrassing that this kind of thing goes on in our village, just tossing people onto the street like that," said a woman walking her dog as she watched tenants, young and old, struggling to get what they could out of the house before it was sealed up by village officials.

Bloch said that in the past year, SEVCA provided housing assistance to 1,146 individuals, and prevented 1,034 from becoming homeless. More than half of the needs addressed by SEVCA's Family Services staff were housing-related.

"We pride ourselves on having developed positive relationships with about 80 to 90 different landlords in the two counties [Windham and Windsor] in general," she said. "But finding available quality affordable housing remains a challenge overall in Vermont. The need is so great that it can take time for a space to become available."

In regard to the Green Street eviction, Bloch noted, "With an emergency situation like this, even if someone can couch surf or get put up in a hotel or shelter, the question remains — what do they do with their stuff or how do they transport it (quickly) in the meantime? This is where community partnerships would come in; to try to find donated secure storage space ... it's a complex problem we have to try to work through."

SEVCA Family Services Director Pat Burke said she knows a woman who has a job, but has to sleep in her truck.

"Housing is tough and its getter tougher, " she said, adding that, anecdotally, she has noticed more and more conversations with co-workers around the increased number of people needing help finding housing in "the last two months."

She cannot put a finger on the cause, however. "The economy? Tight housing in Vermont? Low wages and not enough jobs?" she asked.

But other than the social service agencies responding and doing what they could to find temporary housing for some, none for others, and no assurances of anything more permanent, 20 more people are being added to the Rockingham-Bellows Falls homeless list, with barely three months to go until temperatures are expected to fall below freezing.