

4 GUNNED DOWN AT DETROIT DRUG DEN - GOVERNMENT-OWNED HOME WAS RAIDED 4 TIMES LAST YEAR

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A vacant house repeatedly raided by narcotics cops - and owned by the **Detroit** Housing Commission - was the scene of shootings Wednesday that left four people dead and neighbors wondering why more hadn't been done to get rid of the **drug den** before violence erupted.

It also raised the specter of **Detroit** 's longstanding problem with thousands of abandoned properties, many of which become havens for **drug** users that police try to shut **down** , but often with limited success.

Authorities raided the house - on Sorrento near Orangelawn, on **Detroit** 's west side - four times last year, making more than 20 arrests and seizing marijuana and cocaine.

The Wayne County Prosecutor's Office said Wednesday that it routinely works to seize homes and put them up for public auction when they have been targets of two or more **drug** raids. But that doesn't apply to properties owned by government agencies such as the DHC.

The Sorrento home's last tenants moved out in 2003.

"It wasn't DPD's cracks that it fell through," **Detroit** Police Department spokesman James Tate said. "We get complaints, we go out ... we bust."

DHC spokeswoman Randye Bullock said the commission routinely deals with squatters in its vacant homes, but there's never been "something this tragic."

Last August, she said, a group of squatters was evicted after the commission received complaints. The building was secured with boards over the windows.

Still, the squatters returned. She said police never notified the commission of the recent **drug** busts made **at** the house.

Authorities were called to the home about 8:30 a.m. Wednesday and found a man who had been shot to death outside. They said the man apparently had tried to escape the home through a window.

Three more bodies - another man and two women - were discovered shot to death inside. One of the women killed was pregnant, police said.

Police, who said the shootings were **drug** -related, said that the target may have been a woman scheduled to testify in an upcoming trial, but that woman was not among the victims. Her name was not released. Authorities were also investigating another theory that one or more of the victims stole **drugs** from the shooter.

Police did not have a suspect in the shootings and did not identify the victims. But Sam White of **Detroit** said his cousin, Ben Jackson, 35, was among those shot.

"He was a good guy," White said. "I just want to know what happened."

Reggie Robinson, 45, of **Detroit** said his friend Jackson had been living in the Sorrento home with several women.

"He must've just got caught up in something bad," Robinson said. "It's tough on the streets."

Neighbors of the Sorrento house, who asked not to be identified because the shooter is still on the loose, said **drug** dealers and users swarmed the house for months, despite the raids and DHC's attempt to secure the property.

"They were smoking crack up in there," said one man who lives on the street. "I know that for a fact."

The man, whose grandchildren visit him regularly, said he often called police about the house.

"I would've liked for them to either board it up or sell it so someone could fix it up and move in there," he said. "It was a decent house."

Another man who lives on the block said it was common knowledge that the home was a crack house.

"They didn't mess with us; we didn't mess with them," he said.

While DHC officials said the windows had been boarded and the electricity shut off, neighbors said the squatters somehow turned the power back on and lived comfortably.

According to the most recent deed for the property, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development bought the home in 1972, but housing commission officials said they likely took ownership more than 30 years ago.

The DHC owns **at** least 400 homes in **Detroit**, Bullock said. Last year, HUD took control of the commission, citing decades of frustration with its money mismanagement, insubordinate employees and lax leadership. The takeover was supposed to clean up hundreds of rat-infested and crumbling homes.

Last year, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office filed lawsuits against 177 properties in attempts to dismantle **drug** houses. Of those cases, 154 resulted in consent judgments with owners agreeing to evict **drug** dealers and bring the property up to code. The prosecutor took property titles in six cases last year.

Those figures are **down** , however, from previous years. In 2002, the **Drug** House Unit filed 621 lawsuits taking three titles and reaching consent judgments in 237 cases.

Maria Miller, a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office, said the office has gotten better **at** searching for titles before filing lawsuits on properties.

"We basically file only on properties where we know there is not a title dispute, and where the quality of the houses are good so that we stand a better chance to resell them," she said.

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ILLUSTRATION: Map MARTHA THIERRY **Detroit** Free Press

CAPTION: One of the victims is taken from the home Wednesday. Police said two men and two women - one of them pregnant - were killed.

SUSAN TUSA/ **Detroit** Free Press

Detroit Housing Commission officials said the windows **at** the home, right, had been boarded and the electricity was shut off, but neighbors said squatters had power and lived there comfortably. Police said the shootings there Wednesday were **drug** -related. The shooter is still on the loose.

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