

REVIEW AIMS TO WEED OUT DRUG DENS - U.S. URGES DETROIT AGENCIES TO BOND IN WAKE OF KILLINGS

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A day after four people were gunned down in one of its vacant properties that had been converted into a **drug den**, the Detroit Housing Commission set **out** Thursday **to** inspect the approximately 130 empty houses it owns throughout the city.

But the efforts were too little and too late for at least one grieving family member and federal housing officials who said the inspection should have been done long ago.

Those officials also said poor communication between Detroit police - who had raided the home on Sorrento four times last year - and the Housing Commission allowed problems **to** fester that led **to** the tragedy.

Donna White, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development - which took control of the Detroit Housing Commission last July - said police apparently did not regularly notify the DHC about **drug** activity at the Sorrento home. Housing Commission officials said they learned from a reporter, not police, about the four homicides, which police said were **drug**-related.

"Unfortunately, it sounds like this is going **to** create a better working relationship with the Detroit Police Department," White said. "If the Police Department had been there, why didn't the Housing Commission know that? The line of communication needs **to** be there.

"If it's not, here's the result: people's lives."

Detroit police spokesman James Tate said his department did everything it was supposed **to**. Wayne County keeps tabs on raided homes via signed search warrants, he said.

"As the Detroit Police Department, we don't care whose home that is," Tate said. "Our goal is **to** get the dope **out** of the house and **out** of the neighborhood. We don't take over the houses."

DHC spokeswoman Randy Bullock said the goal of the inspections is **to** tally how many other homes have been taken over by squatters and turned into **drug dens**. That's what happened at 9655 Sorrento on the west side, where a woman who was nearly nine months pregnant was among the victims Wednesday morning.

"Normally, if we don't get complaints and the home's not scheduled for inspection, we have no reason **to** go **out** there," Bullock said. "Our manpower would be spent somewhere else."

But after Wednesday's bloodshed, the commission decided **to** visit each of its vacant units and "see what the status is," she said.

That's little consolation for Detroitier Edward Floyd, whose 47-year-old son, Clifford, was among those killed.

"That house was raided four times last year," Floyd said. "Do something about it."

The other three victims were identified Thursday as 35-year-old Ben Jackson, 43-year-old Debra Thomas and 23-year-old Tawana White.

White was pregnant, according **to** the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office.

Jackson, who lived illegally in the house for months, was shot multiple times, as were White and Floyd. Thomas was shot once in the head.

Each time Detroit police raided the home last year, they made arrests and confiscated crack cocaine and marijuana.

Normally, homes that are repeatedly raided can be seized by the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office and put up for auction. But the county can't seize homes that are owned by government agencies such as the federally funded DHC.

The last tenants of the Sorrento house moved **out** in August 2003; it needed some repairs before it could be rented **out** again, officials said.

A group of squatters was booted last August after the Housing Commission received complaints. The building was secured with boards over the windows, but the squatters returned and got electricity through an illegal hookup. Jackson and his visitors used a space heater **to** keep warm, officials said.

White, the HUD spokeswoman, said the high vacancy rate of DHC-owned homes is one reason the federal agency took control last year. Of the 400 so-called scattered sites - or single-family homes - that the DHC owns, officials estimate one-third are vacant.

HUD has been working since the summer **to** develop programs **to** prepare homes **to** be sold or **to** be rented **to** low-income residents. It also is developing plans **to** deal with vacant units that squatters are using, White said.

Frank McGhee, coordinator of Neighborhood Service Organization's Youth Initiatives Project, said it isn't enough **to** keep watch over abandoned houses.

"You can watch those houses as long as you want," he said, "but eventually, individuals who sell **drugs** are going **to** target and use that house for dealing."

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo SUSAN TUSA Detroit Free Press

CAPTION: Detroiter Demetrius Smith, 27, who identified himself as a cousin of one of the victims, waits for information from police Wednesday about the four homicides.

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